Hubbell Trading Post

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Hubbell Trading Post
National Historic Site
Arizona

Churro Sheep

Navajo-Churro sheep are descended from the Churra, an ancient breed from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). The Churro was the first breed of domesticated sheep in the New World. Imported in 1598 by the Spanish explorer Juan de Oñate, the Churro was used to feed and clothe Spanish settlers and conquistadors.

By the 17th century, the Churro became the mainstay of Spanish ranches and villages along the upper Rio Grande Valley in what is now New Mexico. Hispanic settlers relied on Churros for food and fiber, developing a style of weaving known as the Rio Grande Weaving Style. These sheep were acquired by the Navajo, became the focus of their economy, culture, and arts, and were the beginning of the renowned Navajo weaving tradition. The Navajo-Churro Sheep of today are descended from this genotype.

An Endangered Breed

Churro sheep remained the primary source of wool for the Navajo until 1863. During the 1850s, thousands of Churros were trailed west to supply the California Gold Rush. Most of those that remained behind were crossed with fine-wool rams to supply the demand for garment wool caused by an increasing population and, later, the Civil War.

In 1863 the U.S. Army under the command of Colonel Kit Carson marched into the lands of the Navajo and began a systematic campaign of destroying all means of Navajo livelihood. The army slaughtered sheep by the thousands, as well as burning crops and killing other livestock. A few bands of Churro managed to survive because they were moved to remote canyons.

Faced with starvation during the winter of 1863–1864, thousands of Navajo surrendered to U.S. Army troops in a forced removal policy from their traditional homelands known as the Long Walk. More than 8,000 Navajo walked more than 300 miles to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, to a reservation area called Bosque Redondo. Enduring extreme hardships, the Navajo were incarcerated at Bosque Redondo for four years. In 1868 the Navajo returned to their homeland under a treaty of agreement between the U.S. government and the Navajo Tribe.

Churro Sheep Re-introduced

After the incarceration at Bosque Redondo, the Navajo were issued new breeds of sheep and encouraged by Indian agents to increase their flocks. Federal agents gave two sheep to every man, woman, and child. In 1870 the U.S. government supplied the Navajo with native Mexican sheep—a cross between Churro and Kentucky Merino brought to the Southwest over the Santa Fe Trail. Other attempts were made by the U.S. government to build up mutton production. Each resulted in further contamination of the Churro breed.

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Hubbell Trading Post and the Churro Sheep

When John Lorenzo Hubbell began trading at the present location in Ganado, Arizona, the Navajo sheep on the reservation numbered not less than 550,000 head. The corrals of the Hubbell Trading Post held lambs and sheep, purchased from Navajo stockmen, until they could be herded to the railroad. During the 1920s, the Hubbells were active in the sheep and goat trade, purchasing animals and collecting them at Ganado for resale in various markets.

The Hubbells grazed and maintained the sheep on the Hubbell property as they accumulated sheep through their various trading operations. The sheep were held until shipping time and then driven to railroad loading pens at Chambers, Arizona, or Gallup, New Mexico. Along with the sheep on the Hubbell lands in Ganado, thousand of sheep were also kept at various herders' grounds throughout Navajo lands and eventually herded to the railroads at Chambers or Gallup as well.

Churro Sheep Reduction

During the 1930s and 1940s, a U.S. government program of soil and range conservation called for the forced reduction of flocks of sheep on Navajo land. As a result, tens of thousands of sheep were killed. The economic impact among the pastoral Navajo was severe. By the 1970s, fewer than 450 Navajo-Churro sheep were left on Navajo land.

Navajo-Churro Sheep Restoration

In the mid-1970s several individuals began the work of preserving the breed and revitalizing the Navajo and Hispanic flocks. It was also hoped to revive the authentic Navajo and Rio Grande weaving traditions.

Today there are organizations that promote restoration and development of the traditional Navajo-Churro sheep breed.

Navajo-Churro Sheep Breed Standard

Navajo-Churro sheep have coarse, long wool, including an outer coat and a soft inner coat. Their colors are varied in shades of white, tan, brown, black, and grey. They also have patterns of color. The sheep have long, wool-less legs and narrow bodies. Their bellies have little or no wool. Some rams have four fully developed horns, a trait shared by few other breeds in the world.

Navajo-Churro sheep are highly adaptable to extremes of climate and resistant to disease. They breed easily and twins or triplets are not uncommon. The meat of the sheep is flavorful and has a low fat content.

The wool of the Navajo-Churro sheep is highly valued by hand spinners for the open locks and wide range of colors.

Continuing the Tradition

Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site is unique in the way that it continues to operate as a trading post for the Ganado community and the surrounding area. During

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the height of the trading operation J. L. Hubbell acknowledged that it was the sheep, wool, and Navajo weaving that contributed greatly to the success of his business. Since the Navajo had no form of modern currency but had plenty of sheep, the Navajo people contributed to and benefited from the economy this way. Although there may have been difference in values and lifestyles between the varying cultural groups, the trading of sheep and wool was a valuable commodity for all.

In trying to provide a sense of what this place was, Hubbell Trading Post has a herd of registered Navajo-Churro sheep. Reestablishing the Navajo-Churro breed provides support for the traditional belief that sheep are a vital park of Diné life.