

The Story of Navajo Churro Sheep

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The Diné asked their Holy People to send them a sheep that would live with them, that they could care for, and that would provide them with a sustainable living. Diné philosophy, spirituality, and sheep are intertwined like wool in the strongest weaving. Sheep symbolize the Good Life, living in harmony and balance on the land. In the early 1600s, the Navajo lifestyle changed to pastoralism when they acquired “la raza churra” sheep from the Spanish colonists. The Navajo-Churro breed assumed a central role in the People’s psychology, creativity, and religious life.

With songs, prayers, and techniques taught to them by Spider Woman and looms first built by Spider Man, traditional Navajo weaving developed to utilize the special qualities of the glossy Navajo-Churro wool. Unlike wool from other breeds, wool from Churro sheep is low in lanolin, so it does not require valuable water for washing nor time-consuming carding. It can be shorn, hand cleaned, then spun into tightly twisted yarn that readily absorbs indigo and native vegetal dyes, from which the Navajo artists create weavings famous for their creativity, luster, fine texture, and durability. The wool can be easily felted for a variety of uses. The distinctive long-haired pelts are highly valued.

The Churro can usually be shorn twice a year, rather than the normal annual shearing. The wool comes in natural colors, including apricot, grey, black, brown, beige, and white, which are highly-prized by hand-spinners. Churros are resistant to many sheep diseases and can survive in harsh, dry conditions. The fine wool Merino and Rambouillet breeds require more resources such as grass and water, and more management. Churro meat has excellent flavor and is very lean in comparison to the meat of other common breeds.

Find these places, products, and tools at the Trading Post and tell how they are related to sheep.

Freight wagon _____

Rugs _____

Loom _____

Spindle _____

Batten _____

Rove _____

Hogan _____

Loading chute _____

Vegetative Dye Poster _____

Book or Painting _____

Find out the story of Spiderwoman.

Name two books that you have read that tell stories about sheep.

1) _____

2) _____

Characteristics of a Navajo Churro:



List 5 products coming from sheep:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

Why is the Navajo Churro breed important to local culture?

By the 1970s, only about 450 of the old type Navajo-Churro existed on the entire Navajo Nation, and only a few were found in other locations. In the mid-1970s, animal scientist Dr. Lyle McNeal recognized the genetic and cultural significance of the Navajo-Churro and began the Navajo Sheep Project. The project has placed many breeding stock with Navajo families and helped form the nucleus of Ganados del Valle/Tierra Wools flocks in Los Ojos. The Navajo-Churro Sheep Association was founded to maintain a breed registry and ensure quality. Today, there are several thousand Churro sheep from throughout the United States registered with the association.

Diné be' iiná, Inc. (The Navajo Lifeway) was founded by Navajos in 1991 to represent and assist Navajo Nation sheep and goat producers. DBI organizes year-round educational programs, presents the annual Sheep is Life Celebration, and provides services to: 1) increase recognition of the importance of sheep to cultures and lifeways; 2) improve the quality of sheep and wool resources on the Navajo Nation; 3) improve marketing of Navajo wool and lamb products; 4) educate the public and regulatory agencies about the importance of sheep to the lifeways of native and traditional peoples; and 5) promote economic development that is culturally relevant and technologically appropriate in some of the most rural communities in our nation.



List 3 reasons that Navajo Churro sheep are superior.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Why were Churro sheep an “endangered” breed?

What animals are kept with the sheep?

Can these animals be used in the fiber arts?

What things are needed to care for sheep?

Sheep are found on the Seal of the Navajo Nation and the Navajo Nation Flag as a symbol of what?

Draw a Churro Sheep or a product coming from Churro sheep.

Interview a sheep herder. Ask the following questions.

1. What breed of sheep do you have?
2. How many sheep do you have?
3. Why do you raise sheep?
4. Did your parents, grandparents, or anyone else in your family raise sheep? Who and when?
5. Do you practice any of the fiber arts? If so which ones and what do you make?
6. What sheep products do you sell or trade?
7. Could you tell a story about visiting or trading at Hubbell Trading Post?

Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site

Churro Sheep Field Guide



John Lorenzo Hubbell established the Trading Post in Ganado in 1878 based largely on the economy of sheep. The Navajo traded their blankets, wool, sheep, and pelts for coffee, flour, sugar, canned goods, hardware, tools, and cloth. The trading post was also a meeting place providing news, entertainment, education, medical care, and jobs. Mr. Hubbell encouraged weavers to create high quality rugs and tapestries that became famous world-wide. The Ganado Red is a primarily red, geometrical rug design that was popularized by J. L. Hubbell. He felt his job was “to find a market for their products and vigilantly watch that they keep improving in the production of same, and advise them which commands the best price.” While his goal was to make money, he believed that if he prospered, the Navajo would, too. The Hubbells were very active in the sheep and goat trade.