

by Gerhard Damm

Buffalo Breeding Mania in South Africa

Gerhard R Damm compiled this article from reports by Christopher Spillane and Kevin Crowley, Bloomberg News

Africa's biggest-horned and disease-free buffalo was valued at a record amount in a February 2016 auction after businessman Peter Bellingham, of Tambotie Floodplains near Mookgophong bought a 25 percent share in a bull named Horizon for 44 million rand (\$2.8 million).

That values the animal at a record 176 million rand, surpassing the 40 million rand paid for a buffalo named Mystery by a group including billionaire Johann Rupert in 2013. Horizon's horns are 55 inches wide, compared with Mystery's 53 inches. "It was a unique opportunity to own the best genes in the world," said Hendrik de Kock, of Wildswinkel (Pty) Ltd., which ran the auction.

Bellingham said that the four investors in Horizon will put 40 cows - ten per investor - with the bull with each investor keeping the offspring of their cows. Du Toit would like to have Horizon remain on his farm.

Breeders in South Africa, the biggest market for such animals, are willing to pay record prices for the genes of buffaloes they believe can increase their herd's horn span, which is desirable to hunters [sic].

Jacques Malan, breeder of Horizon and owner of Lumarie Game Ranch said that two hundred years ago African buffaloes regularly had horns spanning more than 60 inches. He also stated that "hunting has now eliminated the largest animals from the gene pool with a horn spread of 40 inches today considered big" and that "we breed them to be able to breed back the top genetics, [w]e're not here to create something that was never there before, we're trying to replace."

Buffalo breeding is part science, part experience, says Malan. In females breeders look for characteristics such as good horn length, enough milk and regular calving intervals, while for males indications include horn size, body mass and shape. That know-how is complemented with DNA testing to prevent inbreeding [sic] as well as identifying strong breeding lines. Diseases are among Malan's greatest concerns, so new buffalo must be inspected by a vet before they are introduced to his property, while his staff regularly usher game into bomas where they are dipped to kill ticks which can carry disease.

Breeding high-value Cape buffalo has become an intricate business - breeding partners have to be carefully selected to get the best return on investment, the animals are fed a special diet and are microchipped. Just the insurance alone on a single animal can run into astronomical figures each month. "The prices paid for buffalo bulls are being inflated by wealthy breeders trading between each other and aren't underpinned by wider demand for hunting", according to Chris Niehaus, a former chief executive officer of the South African Hunters and Game Conservation Association. "In my opinion it's a bubble. I understand financial markets and I can see a bubble when one raises its head," Niehaus, who is also a former CEO of HSBC Holdings Plc (HSBA)'s South Africa unit, said by phone. "These people

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who are playing a financial shell game between each other are putting one of the greatest conservation success stories in the world at risk.”

Such approaches to [buffalo] breeding risks reducing the genetic variation of the animals and losing important traits for survival, according to Cindy Harper of the University of Pretoria’s Veterinary Genetics Laboratory. “Captive-bred animals can lose their ability to adapt to natural vegetation, drought and lose their responses to predators,” Harper said by phone. “If your breeding program is focused on only one trait such as horn length or color then you risk losing other important traits and genetic variation and fixing negative factors in your herd.”

Selective breeding can also help sustain less hardy animals that may not have survived in the wild as well, according to South Africa’s Endangered Wildlife Trust. “They could be losing the ability to defend themselves, physiologically and immunologically, against diseases, they could be losing the ability to protect themselves from predators,” said Wildlife Trade and Ranching Project Manager Andrew Taylor. “If you end up domesticating them, the benefit for conservation is negligible.”

Paul Stones, South African Outfitter and Professional Hunter, said in a blog already on 8th September 2014 that “market pricing is a free beast, capitalism ensures this. However, when greed supersedes longevity, it is highly dangerous. Short term gain over long term security will always have its victims. In this case professional hunting through the marketing to clients, be they foreign or local, is going to suffer hugely. The allure of seeking that elusive 60 inch kudu bull, 30 inch nyala or 45 inch buffalo is slowly but surely being eroded. Many landowners currently refuse to allow us to hunt animals of this size, stating that such specimens are worth far, far more to the breeder. If we wish to hunt them then the price offered to us is so exorbitant most would be too embarrassed to even offer it to a client. Also, as soon as the clients realize that coming to South Africa removes the chance of finding that elusive trophy in the wild, they will seek other options. Most definitely!”

Incidentally, Horizon’s sale bucks the recent trend for wild animal prices in South Africa. Average buffalo prices, including females, dropped 30 percent in 2015, according to data compiled by South Africa’s North West University. Prices of sable and roan antelope, dropped 35 percent and 39 percent respectively.

Editor’s Note: For more information see also:

- <http://www.biznews.com/briefs/2015/01/13/buffalo-bull-market-lures-south-african-billionaires-horns-worth-millions/>
- <http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2016/02/16/Men-who-run-with-buffalo>
- <http://wildswinkel.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Wildswinkel-Piet-du-Toit-Auction-2016-Results-Final-150216.pdf>
- <http://wildswinkel.co.za/buffalo-the-classic-breed/>
- African Indaba Vol 5 # 3 (The Influence of Trophy Measurements in Cape Buffalo by Dr. Winston Taylor and Cape Buffalo: Is the SCI Trophy Scoring System wrong? By Dr. Kevin Robertson)
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by Gerhard Damm

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- African Indaba Vol 10 # 1 (Is this the Future of Cape Buffalo Hunting by Rolf D Baldus)