



PRO PATRIMONIO MONTANO

Rete per la conservazione del patrimonio genetico delle montagne
Netzwerk zum Erhalt der genetischen Vielfalt der Bergwelt
The Mountain Heritage Network

Conservation of Ciuta Sheep – smallest sheep in the Alps

The Ciuta sheep (pronounced tshiuta) still exists in a small northern Italian side valley of Valtellina, where it lives freely in woods and pastures for most of the year. The habitat is harsh and consists of meagre and steep pastures at altitudes between 800 - 2700 m above sea level. In winter, the animals are kept for 2-3 months in barns and fed with hay and dry leaves.



(archive picture)

Striking about the Ciuta are the goat-like horns of the females, this occurs only in original breeds of sheep. Together with the Tavetsch sheep in the Grisons Oberland and the sheep of Montafon in Vorarlberg, the Ciuta could be a direct descendant of the extinct Peat sheep (*Ovis aries palustris*). It is interesting that all three breeds are referred to as "Tshiut" in the respective local language. Female Ciuta weigh only 30-35 kg and have a withers height of only 40-45 cm, they are the smallest breed of sheep of the Alpine region. The wool is of low quality and low productivity. The very low in-put and the use in extremely extensive farming needs to be taken into consideration when looking at their economic potential.

For about 30 years, the farmers have tried to crossbreed with the large-framed Bergamasca sheep to make the breed more "productive". This did not succeed, but the pure Ciutas have almost disappeared. When the sheep were brought down from the Alp in autumn 2013 of the almost 500 sheep only just three dozen reasonably pure Ciutas could be identified. With the help of the local government veterinarian, it was possible for the network "Pro Patrimonio Montano" to buy 25 animals and thus to form four new breeding nuclei. Other breeders are participating on a private basis in the conservation programme. Thus, the breed will hopefully be saved at the last minute. With the help of the local administration and educational events other parties will be invited to join. The task ahead is substantial but important.





The project of the Ciuta sheep advances

With support of the Veterinary Authority (ASL) of the Valtellina province and the regional animal breeding association (APA) the Ciuta conservation project could be presented at an orientation meeting on 3 April 2014 to the Valley dwellers of Val Masino. The project met with an unexpectedly great interest. All 85 seats in the large community hall were occupied, 34 more people had standing to participate. Following this, a great number of directly interested people signed up for participation in the project. Among them were people who offered an original animal still for sale, others who wanted to join in with their pristine animals in the "Ciuta Club" and those who wanted to take over a new nucleus group. Before Easter, seven new breeding groups were formed. Thus, the PPM own stock of breeding animals and the number of farmers involved in the project doubled (incl. five newly added private holders) quadrupled to 16. The provisional herd register of Pro Patrimonio Montano now includes about 60 own animals, the animals of the private holders still need to be evaluated and incorporated.



Outlook

In Val Masino is now a huge enthusiasm for the conservation of the Ciutas. PPM were already offered the use of separate Alps. In seven agritourism farms the sheep can be seen. Other animals have been discovered on the Alto Lario, which will also be integrated into the project now. Yet there is still a long way to go. For the long-term

security the stock has to be raised to over 200 animals and at least ten male breeding lines.

We are happy to count on your help !

⇒ www.patrimont.org

Contact persons for the project:

Italy: Dr. Kurt Kusstatscher, Afingerweg 40, I-39050 Jenesien; k.kusstatscher@trifolium.net
Dott.vet. Silvana Cerasa; Az.Sanit.Locale, I-23017 Morbegno; s.cerasa@asl.sondrio.it
Switzerl.: Hape Grunenfelder, Schneebergstr. 17, CH-9000 St.Gallen; hape.grunenfelder@gmx.net