



The Endangered Texas Longhorn

From the tips of its namesake horns to the hooves that tread the Lone Star soil from El Paso to Amarillo and beyond, the majestic Texas Longhorn is a truly remarkable animal. Descending from Spanish cattle brought to the new world nearly 500 years ago, the breed has been shaped by the arid and rugged landscape of the Southwest with an influence stretching even further than its iconic headgear. Historian and author John E. Rouse summed up this influence with one paragraph: "The protein-rich American diet started with the Spanish cow. That animal changed the course of American civilization, altering the life, culture, and economy of individuals, empires, nations and continents. The cattle dominion that flourished on virgin grasslands from the Argentine to Canada was built on the Spanish cow."

But as influential as this resilient creature has been to America and to the world, it appears to be facing a fight from which it very well may not recover— The Texas Longhorn breed is now classified as “Critically Endangered” by The Livestock Conservancy, and faces extinction if action is not taken soon.

The foundation stock of Texas Longhorn cattle were used for oxen, hides, meat, and milk – a truly multipurpose breed. In the 1830s, political control of Texas switched to Anglos, and during the Civil War, cattle management essentially ceased so that cattle ran totally free throughout the Texas frontier. After the war, vast herds became the source of Texan wealth and recovery as cattle were trailed north to satisfy the demand for beef that came with industrialization and a growing nation.

During the 19th and 20th century, “improved” British, European, and Asian breeds of cattle were brought to the region to crossbreed with the tough Texas Longhorn to boost beef production, and the purebred Texas Longhorn’s popularity began its descent. This influx of new breeds has very nearly caused the extinction of many of today’s heritage breeds.

Fortunately, Texas Longhorns have always been connected with Texan identity, and some ranchers have maintained purebred herds. Unfortunately, the name “Longhorn” has driven breeding decisions so much that there are far more crossbred animals than purebred Texas Longhorns. Breeders have favored horn growth at the expense of other traits that had made up the hardy and self-sufficient Longhorn, leaving just a handful of purebred stock in existence. A 2013 census conducted by The Livestock Conservancy shows the global population to be just over 3,000 animals, with approximately 1,200 Longhorns alive inside the U.S. – a dangerously low number that has been in sharp decline in recent years due to crossbreeding, herd reductions, and retiring ranchers.

As a reaction to the perilous situation facing the Texas Longhorn breed, a few ranchers, in cooperation with The Livestock Conservancy, have organized and began a quest to save the old, traditional pure Spanish Texas Longhorn cattle. “Our census numbers tell us the Texas Longhorn is among the most endangered livestock breeds in America” said Dr. Alison Martin, The Livestock Conservancy’s Research and Technical Program Director, “which is quite ironic because they are one of the most well-known breeds.”

Adding Longhorns to the Conservancy’s endangered list is just the first step in the fight to preserve the breed. “Promotion and education of the public are essential to effective conservation” said Martin. “These animals are part of agriculture, which means they need a market in order to justify farmers and ranchers spending time and money raising them. For beef cattle, this means we literally have to eat them to save them.” By increasing the demand for Longhorns, ranchers will be encouraged to breed more animals, which helps increase the total population.

One of the Conservancy’s most substantial hurdles to saving Longhorns lies in promotion. “When you only have a handful of breeders selling Longhorns, you only have a few people promoting them,” said Ryan Walker, native Texan and Marketing and Communications Manager for the Conservancy. “We have partnered with the Cattlemen’s Texas Longhorn Registry, which registers nearly all of the remaining purebred stock to help spread the word, but we need all the help we can get to let people know how urgent this situation is. If trends continue, the Texas Longhorn could potentially face extinction within just a few generations.”

In addition to promoting Longhorns to consumers, the Conservancy also needs new breeders to raise the animals. And raising Texas Longhorns can easily be profitable, as they consume much less feed than mainstream cattle breeds. The combination of prolonged drought in the West and growing interest in grass-fed, lean beef place Texas Longhorns in a prime position as a sustainable, self-sufficient alternative source for beef production. “Texas Longhorns have been adapting over hundreds of years to thrive in a climate that most cattle wouldn’t easily be able to survive in” said Martin. In addition, they produce lean meat with less cholesterol than mainstream breeds, providing a desirable alternative for health-conscious consumers.

The Livestock Conservancy has a long track-record of rescuing critically endangered animals. There are currently 22 breeds that are considered “Recovering,” with their populations nearly secure, and many more breeds that have graduated off the list completely, no longer being classified as endangered. Through research, education, and promotion by the Conservancy and its partners, Texas Longhorns have a fighting chance to avoid fading into the history they helped create.

For more information about Texas Longhorns and how you can help save them from extinction, visit www.livestockconservancy.org, call (919) 542-5704, or write to: The Livestock Conservancy, PO Box 477, Pittsboro, NC 27312.