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The endangered indigenous breed – the Drežnica goat as a symbol of local identity in Slovenia

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Abstract

Historically, goat farming was an important economic activity and a significant source of income, especially for the inhabitants of the western part of Slovenia in the Julian Alps (Posočje[†]). In this region, dairy cattle were predominant at middle altitudes, while goats were only kept in the higher mountain areas, where the steep and rocky mountain pastures were only suitable for goats. Over the centuries, this environment gave rise to the indigenous Slovenian goat breed, the Drežnica goat. Even today, the Drežnica goat is closely associated with traditional agricultural practices such as seasonal dairy farming, while the chevon type of the Drežnica goat is characterised by an even more specific type of agricultural practise that is unique to Slovenia. In Slovenia, goat farming and grazing were often accompanied by legal restrictions in the past, which led to the depopulation of mountain villages and the transformation of the landscape. This study underscores the resilience of the Drežnica goat breed, highlighting its crucial role not only in sustaining biodiversity but also in maintaining the cultural and ecological heritage of the Posočje region.

Keywords: Drežnica goat, restriction of goat breeding, intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

A few decades ago, the environment was affected by globalisation, urbanisation, population growth, global warming, and climate change. The loss of indigenous

[†] Posočje is a geographical area in western part of Slovenia, which includes the territory along the Soča river.

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(native, autochthonous, or local) breeds and animal genetic resources (AnGR) in general is a major problem for food and nutrition security. In recent decades, the number of indigenous breeds has declined due to the demands of intensive livestock farming and global economic development. It is estimated that almost 30% of indigenous breeds worldwide are endangered (FAO, 2021).

In Slovenia, the conservation of AnGR is included in the various sectoral strategies, plans, and programmes at national level. The long-term programme for the conservation of AnGR biodiversity serves as a strategic document containing the priority measures needed to protect AnGR, with a focus on indigenous Slovenian breeds (Programme, 2023). National legislation recognises 14 livestock breeds as indigenous to Slovenia, but only one of them is the indigenous Slovenian goat breed – the Drežnica goat. This breed is highly valued for its excellent adaptability to poor conditions (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Drežnica goat

The Drežnica goat has the smallest population size among the indigenous breeds in Slovenia. It consists of 1100 goats and is listed as a highly endangered breed (Register, 2023). The population of Drežnica goats is divided into two types depending on the purpose of breeding in their original habitats. The milk type of the Drežnica goat developed in the Bovec area, where the tradition of cheese production dates back to the 13th century, while the meat type of the Drežnica goat developed in the Drežnica region. Goat herds for meat production are predominant (ŽAN, 2019).

In the past, goat breeding was of great importance on Slovenian territory. This influence can also be seen in the fact that most of the local names of all livestock species are derived from the name goat, and many of them have been preserved: Kozjek, Kozarica, Kozarski potok (the Slovenian name for goat is “koza”) (NOVAK, 1970). However, goat farming was not a respected activity in the past,

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and the derogatory term “poor peasant cow” was often used for goats (ŽAN, 2016). The neglect of goat keeping as a livestock activity resulted from a series of grazing bans and sometimes even bans on keeping goats indoors (ŠALEHAR et al., 2014). Despite the great usefulness of the goat as a farm animal, providing excellent milk, meat, skin, etc., goat farming was neglected as a livestock sector. In forestry, it was felt that goat farming should be restricted as much as possible or even eradicated, as they cause damage to young trees. Thus, over the centuries, goat farming was accompanied by numerous legal restrictions, although some foresters themselves admitted that it was not the goats that were the problem, but the unsystematic logging, which often went as far as "clear cutting". The forests in the area of Posočje were overexploited as early as the 16th century, when large quantities of felled timber were used to supply Gorica and trade with Venice (ŽAN et al., 2023). Ironworks were a major consumer of wood. Fires and later the First World War also significantly impacted forest destruction, destroying large areas in Posočje, and the Second World War had similar consequences. During the occupation, the Italians ruthlessly exploited and plundered our forests, leaving their remains behind. Legal regulations that restricted or even prohibited the breeding of goats are known from various eras. Breeding in stables was also often prohibited. In this way, the poor sections of the population were deprived of the only possibility of surviving in this demanding environment, which led to emigration and the gradual depopulation of the mountain villages (ŽAN et al., 2023). With this article, we want to draw attention to the ethnological, socio-economic, and sustainable-ecological aspects of Drežnica goat breeding, which has a completely different meaning today than in the past.

In the fifties of the 20th century, goat breeding was labelled a cultural disgrace

After the end of the Second World War, the majority of the population in Posočje worked in agriculture (ŽAN *et al.*, 2023) (Figure 2). In 1946, a special regulation was issued for goat breeding, after which the number of goats fell drastically and goats were almost completely eradicated. Further restrictions on goat breeding followed in the following years. Official documents stated that goat farming was a cultural disgrace on the landscape. With the departure of the older generation, who attached body and soul to the farming way of life and work, the composition of households changed more and more in favour of industrial employment. In addition to the goats, the number of other farm animals also declined. The mountains began to become overgrown, and some of them are now completely abandoned (ŽAN et al., 2023).



Figure 2: Goats in Posočje, 1950

Goat farming as a survival strategy and the Drežnica goat as a symbol of local identity

In the past, goat breeding was most widespread in the Slovenian region of Posočje, where, due to the natural conditions, it was an important and often the only source of livelihood for the inhabitants. Posočje is the cradle of Slovenian goat breeding and represents the original territory of the only surviving indigenous Slovenian goat breed, the Drežnica goat.

The restriction of goat farming in this demanding environment has deprived the poor population of their only source of livelihood, which has led to the migration and gradual depopulation of mountain villages and environmental changes in the surrounding area. Posočje is the cradle of Slovenian goat breeding and represents the original territory of the only surviving indigenous Slovenian goat breed, the Drežnica goat. As a specific economic sector of great importance, goat breeding is still present in everyday life today, even though there are fewer and fewer breeders in Posočje (ŽAN et al., 2023) (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Milking the Dreznica goats on the mountain

Breeders born in the first half of the 20th century told us with tears in their eyes about the forced abandonment of goat farming, which led to severe existential and psychological problems (ŽAN et al., 2023). As people were forced to give up farming and work in factories, the future was uncertain and unemployment prevailed. People from the Soča Valley emigrated abroad, mainly to America. Emigration only came to a halt around 1960.

In these places, people lived in balance with nature because, together with the goat, they were completely dependent on its conditions. It was a centuries-old transmission of knowledge about goat farming and the values associated with it, which were greatly appreciated by the people. The consequences of the ban were empty villages and a demographic structure with an ageing population. The consequences of the exodus of people from the villages of Posočje continued decades later and are still visible today. The decades-long suppression of goat breeding after the Second World War is reflected in the selection work of the Drežnica goat, which was, therefore, only established in 2000.

Goat breeding is a specific sector of great importance that is still present in everyday life today, although the number of animals in Posočje is not decreasing as fast as the number of breeders. Thus, breeding is spreading among hobby breeders, for whom goat breeding is not a primary source of income. Goat breeding is therefore not only an agricultural industry, but also an important element in the creation of local identity. The threat to the Drežnica goat jeopardises national biodiversity and intangible cultural heritage.

Apart from the small population of the Drežnica goat, the breed's existence is threatened by the lack of active, professional young breeders and the recent increase in attacks by brown bears, wolves, and jackals. Even the appearance of the disease in such a small area can lead to the extinction of the breed. Together with the Drežnica goat, whose existence is still highly endangered, the national biodiversity

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is also threatened, and with it the intangible cultural heritage with its network of complex knowledge, skills, and values that are passed down from generation to generation in the families and herding communities of the region (ŽAN et al., 2023). Today, people no longer depend on goat farming to the same extent and goat farming is increasingly recognised as a valued local activity. Goat products are sought after by consumers and are often an integral part of first-class culinary offerings. Posočje is home to an internationally recognised Slovenian restaurant with a local menu (including dairy products from Drežnica goats) which has been awarded two Michelin stars.

Conclusion and recommendation

The harsh measures to persecute goats, especially after the Second World War, had irreversible consequences for the western part of Slovenia called Posočje: depopulation of villages, the psychological harm to residents, the overgrowth of mountains, an altered landscape, reduced biodiversity. Fortunately, rare and courageous breeders with strong attachments to their goats managed to preserve the only autochthonous goat breed in Slovenia – the Drežnica goat, which today represents the local identity of the Posočje region, where over the centuries it has developed into a unique breed fully adapted to the conditions of its environment. In our research, we sought to identify "who" advocated for, enacted, or demanded these stringent measures and laws. Unfortunately, the original documents can no longer be found and it is very likely that they were destroyed after the Second World War. The traditional agricultural practices for breeding the Drežnica goat breed represent an invaluable intangible cultural heritage. Amidst increasing globalization, preserving this heritage is crucial as it highlights Slovenia's cultural diversity. On the other hand, this heritage is the source of a wealth of knowledge and skills that have been passed on from one generation to the next for centuries and are currently threatened with extinction. The social and economic value of documenting and, above all, directly passing on this type of knowledge is important both for goat farming and for the Slovenian state and, last but not least, contributes to the treasury of the cultural heritage of all mankind.

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