Buffalos in Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama

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Origin

Between 1903 and 1906 the first buffalos were introduced to the island of Trinidad, like labor animals for the sugar cane plantations. Animals of the Nili Ravi, Jafarabadi, Surti, Nagpuri and Bhadawari races were imported; later in 1924 and 1938, animals of the Murrah race were brought from India. The crossing of these races gave rise to the Bufalypso, animal of meat characteristics, call thus by the mixing of the words buffalo and Calypso, the Caribbean typical music. It was the bufalypso from Trinidad and Tobago the one that arrives at Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama, thanks to the fact that these islands were declared free of Aphthous fever. The buffalo is brought, always thinking about using it for work in plantations like the African palm, wood and Coco among others. The buffalo in these countries, was taken with great ignorance, about the way of handling it, its health and its virtues. The governments considered it an exotic animal and that is why, when they first arrived, all of them handled them badly and with little care.

Colombia

They entered in 1967, imported by the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCO-RA): thirty females, five bulls and five labor buffalos. These arrived at the region of the pacific coast, to be used in different government programs designed to favor the socially depressed population. Finally, these buffalos, after being kept in precarious conditions, were acquired by the Caldas´ Cattle Fund, which then transferred them to the center part of the country, under good maintenance conditions. It was there where a more organized form of operation and repopulation of the species started. In the year 1970, a second import of one hundred and ten females was brought, increasing therefore the initial herd. It is the Caldas´ Cattle Fund, which begins a work of diffusion of the species, by selling animals to some interested people, who in the year of 1995 created the Colombian Association of Buffalo breeders. For many years, few people showed interest in the species or believed in the potential of buffalos, but thanks to this group of cattle dealers who conserved and increased the herd, it is that nowadays it counts itself with a flock of near one hundred thousand heads. Until the 1990’s new animal and semen imports were realized, as much of Brazil as of Venezuela, by new people interested in the species, contributing this to the genetic improvement of buffalos. From this moment on, a more organized type of work and the selection of the animals, for meat or milk starts, avoiding to the maximum the slaughter of the females in good reproductive state. Something to be emphasized is the certification obtained in 2001 by the Caldas´ Cattle Fund (today Cattle Fund of the Center), for the export of Ecological meat on the part of the German government.
Also, we can speak about how much the commercialization of Buffalo meat has advanced; it is now sold at the large supermarkets of the country, at prices up to 30% higher than those of cattle meat.

Starting in the 2000’s The Colombian Association of Buffalo Breeders, ACB, organizes programs of qualification, diffusion and trade, such as courses, seminars, fairs and auctions in different zones of the country, always trying to present the virtues of the species.

In year 2006 it was realized in the city of Medellín the III SYMPOSIUM OF BUFFALOS OF THE AMERICAS and 2do EUROPE AMERICA, with the attendance of more than eight hundred people from all over the country, as well as a group of near two hundred participants from different countries, among them more than thirty supporting lecturers.

The Colombian government, the press and the different economic sectors, which to that date had only heard mention the buffalo, showed from this moment on, a great interest; nowadays the buffalo is included in the different programs for bovine repopulation, and cattle breeders, who had never considered it for their operations, demand it today.

Colombia is a country with an extension of 1'141,000 km²s, of which more than 35% is ideal for the operation of buffalos, aside from this, the plantation of African palm for the production of Biodiesel is being promoted, and nowadays occupies three hundred and fifty thousand hectares and in the next few years it will have to duplicate this extension; it is there where labor buffalos will be required. After the protocol for the import of semen and embryos from Brazil was approved, the Colombian Association of Buffalo Breeders is at present processing the protocols for the import of reproducers and females, which will allow not only the improvement of the national milk genetics, but the increase of the inventory.

Colombia counts at present on the interest of foreign and national investors for the creation of companies for the processing of the milk, which at the moment is already being processed by several of the producers in the different regions, obtaining prices very superior to those of bovine milk. As it was already mentioned, the meat occupies a special place in the main chains of supermarkets, every time it counts with greater consumer acceptance and work continues in its trade and positioning.

The COLOMBIAN ASSOCIATION OF BUFFALO BREEDERS represents the operations that integrate 95% of the existing buffalos in the country. From one side it represents the union before the different enterprise sectors and the state, and on the other hand, it works in projects like genetic improvement with the control program of genealogical registry, the milk control and tests of lineage among others, with the final mission of positioning the species in the market and improving the herds.

In conclusion, the buffalo in Colombia is a species for triple intention: milk, meat and work, being a profitable business and also a nutritional alternative and facilitator of processes within the different operations, which demonstrates that the future of the buffalo in Colombia is promissory.

Ecuador

There is very little information about buffalos in this country. They made their first import from Trinidad in the 1980’s and like in the other countries, they use the buffalo only like a labor animal. They have a herd of approximately one thousand buffalos, which are in the hands of no more than five breeders, thus giving very few possibilities to the study and understanding of its virtues.
The breeders operate at present as much for milk as for meat and have shown interest in improving the herd, trying to acquire animals from Colombia and semen from Brazil, with not very good results, due to the sanitary controls of the different countries.

Therefore the buffalos in Ecuador have not shown, to date, a great repopulation of its herd. It can be said that Ecuador is at the primary stage of buffalo industry development for which, fortunately, it can count on the integration and sense of cooperation offered at world level by all buffalo breeding countries.

**Guatemala**

In 1980 eleven females and two bulls are brought from Trinidad and Tobago to take advantage of their force in the African palm plantations.

At present the country counts on an inventory of approximately five thousand buffalos into the hands of sixteen breeders, distributed in different regions of the country.

The breeders have been interested in improving genetics, importing semen from Italy, since from the first animal import, they have not been able to realize others.

Although in Guatemala there is a culture of not eating buffalo meat, it has been possible to place the product in meat shops of some cities, that appreciate their flavor, and sell the cuts to the same price as those of cattle meat. The heavy skin of the buffalo is exported to Mexico in amounts of forty to fifty skins every month, to manufacture footwear.

The male buffalos are used to transport coconuts, pineapple, banana tree, mangos and the fruit of the African palm to produce oil, while they get fat to sell its meat and skin.

Cattle ranch Rio Seco counts on one thousand six hundred and seventy two females which are milked twice per day and produced three hundred and eighty nine thousand liters of milk in the 2006, which were sold, to make ice cream, cheese and yogurt.

Discarded males and females are sold in the local market all over the country. As they are few, there is not much of a problem to sale the meat; it is sold at a price which is lower than cattle meat. The main interest is to learn to trade it and to offer good quality animals, and the same with milk. At this moment there is much interest in raising buffalos. The cattle breeders are beginning to know the advantages of these animals and the possibility of importing them is being considered, for which the association of buffalo breeders was created in 2006.

**Panama**

General Omar Torrijos imported from Trinidad and Tobago in the 70’s approximately one hundred buffalos, which were transported in Air Force airplanes, for a farming and agro-industrial program to improve the creeks of the Atlantic area for their colonization and development of social programs with the Indigenous population.

A great part of these animals were sacrificed and consumed by the population and the rest were sold to private cattle breeders.

Aleko Alexiev in its book “The Water Buffalo”, describes how in 1980 general Torrijos, sent to Cuba, as a present to Fidel Castro, thirteen buffalos to begin its raising there, Castro as well, excited with the attributes of the species, later imported from 1983 to 1986 Carabao buffalos, mainly from Australia.

In Panama, starting in 1998, through private investors such as Mr. Guillermo Peláez, Colombian, connoisseur of the potentialities of the buffalo, starts raising buffalos in the pro-
province of Chiriqui, with the acquisition of three hundred buffalos that belonged to the Arauz family in the province of Coche.

Then, from 2001 to 2004 part of the buffalos owned by the Zamorano Institute of Honduras and which came from a cattle herd donated by the FAO and directly brought from India several years before, were sold to reconstruct areas affected by the Mitch hurricane. Another part of this herd, was sold to Mexican cattle breeders.

Today there is a national herd of a little more than two thousand five hundred buffalos which are distributed, five hundred in the province of Chiriqui and two thousands in Bocas del Toro, owned by three cattle dealers.

In the province of Darien, there are fifty buffalos owned by a cattle dealer of Arab origin who has shown great interest in the species wanting to improve its genetics and has imported some reproducers from the USA recently.

Although the country counts on three hundred thousand hectares fit to be used for the operation of the buffalos, these have not had a great development, not only by the difficulties for importing them to grow the herd, but because of the country’s sanitary controls which are very demanding; also, because of the ignorance of cattle dealers and government about the species’ attributes.

At present, the buffalo milk is not commercialized, and the animals are only used for labor in the African palm plantations and for meat which is sold to the same price of bovine meat. The growth and improvement of the species in the country has been difficult, due to the lack of credibility in it, on the part of the organizations in charge of sanitary control, which have come to think that the buffalo is the transmitter of all the diseases found in the country.

Table 1. Comparative table of the different countries.

| COUNTRY   | EXTENSION Km2 | POPULATION   | BUFFALOS | ORIGIN          |
|-----------|---------------|--------------|----------|-----------------|
| COLOMBIA  | 1.141.000    | 42’000.000   | 100.000  | Trinidad y Tobago |
| ECUADOR   | 284.000      | 14’000.000   | 1.000    | Trinidad y Tobago |
| GUATEMALA | 109.000      | 14’000.000   | 5.000    | Trinidad y Tobago |
| PANAMA    | 77.000       | 3’200.000    | 2.500    | Trinidad y Tobago |

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