

## Conserving Cousins

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Conservation of rare and local breeds is finally gaining some international priority, and one group that has organized around this task is operating in the Americas. I try to go to their biannual meetings, which is a great way to keep in touch with what is occurring in breed conservation throughout the Americas. The Spaniards and Portuguese frequently show up as well, so everyone has a great time catching up on what is happening and where.

Some of the researchers and conservationists work specifically with horses, and more especially with the Spanish horses remaining from the conquest. It is great to compare notes with this group to see what is consistent across national boundaries as well as what is different country to country.

Differences among the horse breeds derived from an Iberian origin are certainly present throughout the Americas, but these differences somewhat pale by comparison of any of these horses to Arabs, Thoroughbreds, or Quarter Horses. I consider all of the Iberian breeds to be cousins (at least) with some important distinctions, but also many important similarities. A brief overview of some of the breeds and some of the conservation issues may prove useful. We'll start at the bottom (Chile) and work our way up.

Chile has a few important strains of Spanish horses. The more numerous one is "Criollo", and this is an old and long-established breed in Chile. The Chileans favor moderately sized horses that have great endurance and ability. They also prefer solid colored ones, and dark colors predominate. The Chilean Criollos are probably the most restricted as far as color variation and type.

Chile has a second population that they consider separate from the Criollo, and these are the Chilote horses from the island of Chiloe. These horses are smaller (12 to 13 hands or so) than the Criollo, and have a very Spanish phenotype. Gus Cothran has bloodtyped them, and they do have very strong evidence of an Iberian origin with little or no subsequent crossbreeding. These horses are very few in number, but are becoming popular as mounts for children, and are also finding great popularity in therapeutic riding programs. They seem to have a profoundly kind and willing temperament that makes them ideally suited to working with handicapped individuals – which sounds like a Spanish attribute to me!

Argentina has long been conserving their Criollo horses. These are the popular national horse choice in Argentina, and so their future is secure. They have gone through a variety of fads and fashions, as will any breed. They have historically been around 12 to 14.2 hands. The latest fad was for taller horses, and they discovered that as the horses got much over 14.2 they really lost type, and also lost strength and durability. They then redirected their breeding programs (and judging criteria) to favor the older, original type and size. This is a great boon to conservation, and it is exciting to see the national horse also one that is genetically significant. The Argentines are fascinated by horse color (so of course we all get along great!) and their Criollo varies greatly in color - with the exception that no tobianos nor appaloosa type patterns are allowed within the breed in Argentina.

Other countries with Criollos (and these all have studbooks that allow cross-registration between the countries) include Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil. The choice of colors and styles does vary across countries to a small degree. Uruguay and Brazil allow the tobiano pattern, for example, while the other three do not. Interestingly, none of the five allow any of the appaloosa type patterns to be registered. I have seen some very typically Criollo varnish roans (with spots) in Argentina, but the registry will not accept these. In all countries the popular colors include duns and roans, with the Argentines also favoring sabinos as well.

Brazil also has a few other Iberian strains, including the Mangalarga and the Pantaneiro. These horses have a small population size, but are becoming more popular. Some of these are dead ringers for Spanish Mustangs. The Pantaneiro is from a swampy region, and has great adaptations to that

environment. Many of them are EIA positive, but very few show any signs of disease. This is an important trait in remote and wild region where testing and eradication is not feasible.

I am unaware of any organized efforts to conserve horses in Bolivia and Ecuador, although surely they have Iberian horses in those countries.

In Peru the Iberian horses include the Peruvian Paso, which has long been selected for extreme gaitedness. The Peruvians do have some variation in horse styles and sizes throughout the country, and periodically they have (although this is becoming more difficult) gone back into the vast unregistered local population to add individual horses of great merit to the Peruvian Paso. This has usually been to correct for the Peruvian Paso periodically becoming somewhat overspecialized or overselected for the extreme Paso gait. It will be interesting to see what happens to this interesting breed group of the highly selected Peruvian Paso alongside the somewhat less selected "country horses". It would be a pity to lose the less selected model, but how to save it without it going the way of the standardized breed (and thereby risking the overspecialization that it can correct) is a real challenge in conservation.

The Colombian horse that has been standardized is the Paso Fino. This is yet another very specialized and selected breed, although it seems to have avoided some of the pitfalls of some of the Peruvian horses in terms of maintaining some of its rusticity and adaptation. In the hinterlands of both Colombia and Venezuela are "llanero" or "prairie" horses - a more diverse lot with varying gaits and tough as nails for ranch work. I am unaware of any organized effort to band their breeders together, although the difficult and trying environment in which the llaneros work and survive will probably preserve them just as they are - no other breed could make it. Color varies immensely in these breeds - with tobiano accepted and appaloosa spotting unknown.

The Caribbean region has few defined horse breeds, and the history of many islands is a complicated one of influence by multiple countries. So the status of the horses is likewise murky. Certainly Iberian horses remain in Cuba and Puerto Rico (Paso Fino, as in Colombia). I am unaware of conservation efforts for horses in Cuba, but the Puerto Rican Paso Fino is reasonably popular and secure. In the Bahamas the Abaco horse appears to be an Iberian strain. These horses are only one very small group on one island, and sport some incredible paint type patterns which are generally similar to splashed white horses..

Central America has done very little to organize the breeding and conservation of the local Iberian type horses, but this is now changing with the countries south of Mexico banding together to conserve their interesting old-style horses. These occur in several countries, but are surviving at the periphery of development and culture. Mexico does indeed have a program for conservation, but they have unfortunately defined as "criollo" a rather mixed breed of army horses that has local type, Quarter Horse, and Thoroughbred all mixed in together. I discussed this with other Latin American colleagues at a recent meeting, and they all were perplexed that the Mexicans would use the term "criollo" for this product. This is heartening, in a way, for it indicates that for the majority of Latin America the term "criollo" has a very specific connotation, and that is purely Iberian with little or no outside breeding. A few tantalizing leads for more Iberian and truly "criollo" horses emanate from some remote regions in Mexico such as the Tarahumara areas as well as other backwaters.

Next we'll skip across to the Iberian homeland of these criollo breeds. The Andalusian is much changed, and I was always stumped by the insistence of academics and breeders that they were indeed pure through and through, and not changed by outside breeding. A charming Hungarian colleague finally cracked the puzzle when one of them admitted to him that "no one questions what the big breeders do". The Andalusian is certainly a successful breed, and does betray much of its Iberian origin. The Andalusian breeders, interestingly, cease to register colors that become rare. The latest to fall by the wayside was chestnut, leaving only grey, black, and bay as accepted colors of the Andalusian. The grey covers up a great many colors, though, and I have seen a few roans pop out, as well as at least one linebacked dun. When showing photos of Spanish Mustangs to several colleagues, most indicated that these were indeed very like their own Iberian horses. The one exception was a Spanish Equine Surgeon

who took one look and said - "They cannot be pure - the color is wrong". I was pretty amazed at that response.

The Lusitano of Portugal is nearly identical to the Andalusian of Spain, but has emerged somewhat truer to its roots. The Portuguese still allow color variation - in fact it is rumored that those chestnut Andalusians eventually find homes in Portugal! The Portuguese have a longer tradition of mounted bullfighting, and this has preserved the Lusitano as a somewhat smaller and handier horse than the Andalusian. Some riding schools in Portugal prefer blue-eyed cream horses for their abilities – and this also preserves some interesting color variations.

Other strains in Iberia are the targets of conservation programs. The Sorraia of Portugal is an older type that is now very rare. These were conserved throughout the 1900s by the d'Andrade family, with great dedication and talent. These are a type that most Spanish Mustang fans would acknowledge as similar to their own horses. They are always dun or grullo, and lack white marks. Conservation programs are also formulated for a few northern Iberian breeds, and these are more pony-like and also more cold-blooded than the Sorraia, Lusitano, and Andalusian. These include the Garrano of Portugal and the Gallego of Spain. Basque ponies - the Pottock- are also being conserved. The connection of any of these last three to Spanish Mustangs or Criollos is doubtful, but they are all interesting breeds.

In the USA the conservation of our Iberian horses is fragmented. Sometimes I think that this diminishes conservation of these horses, but at other times I think that this may well be a boon. As long as the fragmentation is not accompanied by in-fighting, it serves to save distinct portions of the gene pool rather than having them all blended as a composite. This is only true, though, if all of these pieces continue to exist in numbers high enough for a genetically healthy population.

A few of the registries aim to be reasonably all-encompassing of Iberian type horses in the USA. These include SMR, SSMA, AIHR, SSBA, and HOA.

The SMR is the oldest of the organized registries, and is still (wisely) open to occasional outside horses after on-site inspection. Spanish Mustang Registry horses include a number from a variety of backgrounds. Featuring very prominently are horses from the Brlawn multigenerational breeding program. Also included are other origins, such as the Cerbat Mountain horses, and some from other regions such as Mountain Home. The SMR is fortunately large and involves adequate numbers of horses so that the population is genetically healthy.

The Southwest Spanish Mustang Association has a slightly different mix of predominant bloodlines, including many from Gilbert Jones, and especially includes many Choctaw horses. Otherwise, the overlap between SMR and SSMA is great.

The American Indian Horse Registry as a special division for type "O" (or "original") horses. These are Iberian in type and breeding, and generally consist of horses that are also eligible for registration in either the SMR or the SSMA.

The Spanish Barb Breeders Association has a slightly different philosophy than the other registries, and has long held that progeny testing is the real proof of a horse and its background. That is, horses are evaluated by what they produce as much as by their own type and appearance. This effort has included some otherwise rare bloodlines, such as Belsky, Romero/McKinley, and Wilbur-Cruce.

The Horse of the Americas registry serves as an umbrella for many of the other groups, meaning that they will accept horses that are accepted by the other registries as well as horses submitted for inspection. They are probably the most inclusive of the registries, but are diligent to maintain the identity of the various strains. This will serve usefully to conserve the overall resource as well as the various components of it.

Robert and Louise Painter's Society for the Preservation of the Barb Horse targets a specific type of horse. The foundation horses included many that are registered with SMR and SSMA, as well as

several that are registered only by the Painters. There is a very interesting and useful concept that is based on type rather than bloodline, which is an important concept with these horses.

Other associations and groups are organized more for limited geographic regions or more isolated pockets of horses. That is, the effort of these groups is with a smaller, more geographically, defined group that might or might not also find acceptance in other registries with a broader scope.

Kiger Mustangs hail from Oregon, and are a controversial group since much of the past selection has shaped these horses into a type that is larger and different than that favored by most of the other groups. They are therefore included by some groups, and excluded by others. Two or three registries for Kiger Mustangs are in operation, divided by issues of origin and practice.

Sulphur Mustangs come from the Mountain Home region of Utah, and include many horses in the SMR as well as the SSMA. These horses also have their own breeders' group. The Sulphur herd area is quite large, and the horses within the management area vary somewhat within the herd area. Many are quite Iberian in type, others are less so. It will be interesting to see what BLM management accomplishes for this group, as well as what direction the breeders take.

Pryor Mountain Mustangs are controversial as an Iberian strain. All except a few on the range are of Iberian type, and bloodtyping likewise points to an Iberian origin for these horses. The BLM manages these horses to preserve the Iberian type. A private breeders' group also tracks and documents adopted horses. The breeders' group is careful to include horses of Iberian type, and to educate and encourage breeders to enhance this type in the domestic population.

In the Southeast are several strains, in varying stages of conservation. The Florida Cracker horses are fortunate in having an active breeders' group and registry. They encourage all breeders of this type, young and old, to get involved and to register horses. They have a very strong conservation goal for this group of horses.

Marsh Tackies are a mixed lot from coastal regions of the deep south. Some of these are very Iberian in type, others less so. A few are being included in the Florida Cracker Horse efforts. Others may well languish and disappear as older breeders succumb one by one.

The Banker Ponies are controversial as strains of Iberian horses, but certainly type and bloodtype point to Iberia for many of these. The various islands have experienced different levels of success with the wild horses, and these include Okracoke, Shackleford, Corolla, and Hatteras. Breeders groups are organizing around the various island strains, and it will be interesting to see what the future holds for this group.

Several feral and owned strains of old-style horses have also recently emerged in New Mexico. Some, such as those of the Baca family, have long been under human control. Others, such as those of Mount Taylor are owned by Dan Elkins and Star Gonzalez, but run as free and wild as unowned horses. The wild herds of the La Jarita mesa have likewise produced some very Iberian appearing horses.

The fragmentation of the conservation effort in the USA has many roots, which can be better understood by comparing them with the situation in South America. The lack of fragmentation in South America is frequently due to governmental or quasi-governmental oversight of registries and breeding. This has both pluses and minuses. In South America the local, Iberian breeds have frequently become a matter of intense patriotic pride and nationalism. This has not happened in the USA with the Iberian strains, but instead the "national horse" designation has somewhat been taken up by the Quarter Horse, which is more an amalgam of a great variety of origins than it is a unique breed. This mirrors the status of most humans in the USA as mixtures of a variety of origins, and so may be more fitting for the USA than is obvious at first thought.

The conservation of the older Iberian strains of horses in the USA remains a challenge, though, in the face of lack of recognition among the general horse-using public of the value of these horses both

genetically and functionally. The fragmentation of the conservation effort serves very well to conserve the uniqueness of each pocket of these horses. The fragmentation does serve to keep population numbers low, though, and some of the unique strains could very easily disappear if certain key breeders either die or quit. This would be a great loss to the equine heritage of the USA.

The conservation of all of these strains - North, South, and Central American - is interesting and important. These are the horses that served the Americas well for centuries. Hopefully as time progresses each country will realize the value of this heritage and assure that it continues for future generations.