

Mexico Up Against a Burro Deficit

Some Farmers Miss Their Jacks and Jennys

By Mary Jordan Washington Post Foreign Service

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TALA, Mexico -- Men with machetes still hack at tequila-producing agave plants; corn stalks still sway in fields dotted with ancient stone churches. But one element is missing from the timeless, picturesque scene: There is not a burro in sight.

"There used to be 50 in every town. Now there is one, if that," said Nicolas Vazquez Ortega, a ranch manager. "Before you used to see packs of mules and donkeys in the fields when you were driving along the road. Now they are disappearing."

Although it seems as improbable as Hawaii running out of pineapples or France without Beaujolais, Mexico has a shortage of donkeys. As farmers abandon the countryside for big cities, move to the United States or shift to tractors and cargo trucks, burros -- long a backbone of Mexican agriculture and a symbol of Mexican life -- have become increasingly scarce.

This trend has so alarmed officials in Jalisco, one of Mexico's most important agricultural states, that they are planning to import donkeys from Kentucky to revive the dwindling population. The project, they said, will bring economic benefits to ailing rural areas, where many poor farmers still depend on beasts of burden.

Donkeys, first brought to Mexico by conquering Spaniards at the turn of the 16th century, have long been a stereotype of rural Mexican life. Even today, said Martin Martinez Cervantes, a Jalisco rural development official, some tourists still expect to find "every Mexican riding a donkey."

But those days are gone. In fact, many farmers have shunned donkeys because of their negative association with poverty and backwardness, officials said. Now, as the animals have started disappearing, people are "realizing their importance," Martinez said.

Both donkeys, known as burros throughout Mexico, and mules, produced by cross-breeding horses and donkeys, have gained belated respect as their numbers have diminished. Farmers say they cause less damage than machines amid the tight rows of blue agave, the spike-leaved plants that produce tequila. Coffee growers in other states say they get better traction than trucks on highland slopes. And in many remote areas with no roads, they are still the only ride home.

Martinez said the demand for donkeys began to dwindle as more young, rural Mexicans relocated to the United States and began sending home enough money for their parents to buy a tractor or a pickup. Increasingly, donkeys were sent to slaughterhouses or not replaced when they died. Now, he said, the demand has outstripped the supply.

International promoters of the donkey argue that these sturdy quadrupeds are stronger than horses, easier to care for and more resistant to hot temperatures; they said mules are even harder. "They are growing in popularity," said Leah Patton of the American Donkey and Mule Society in

Texas, which works to correct what she described as "a lot of misinformation" about donkeys, including the notion that they are not especially bright.

Even if few people know a jack from a jennet, or jenny -- as male and female donkeys are called -- there is growing appreciation of the donkey as "an efficient working machine with a longer life span than a car and the ability to get into places that cars can't," Patton added.

In some parts of Mexico, especially the poor southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, there is no dire donkey shortage. But Francisco Lugo Serrano, the Jalisco official leading the import project, said their numbers have greatly diminished in many other regions, particularly in the more developed north.

The donkeys that remain tend to be small, often more than a head shorter than their American cousins, Lugo said. He plans to import about 50 Kentucky donkeys and breed them with Mexican horses to produce mules, as well as creating a national breeding center that will strengthen Mexican donkey stock.

Steve Aaron, a retired surgeon and health official in Kentucky, is scheduled to come to Mexico later this month to give a PowerPoint presentation on the Mammoth Jack breed. He doesn't use the word donkey, which he said, "means a small gray animal," but calls his animals "mammoths." Aaron said his big-boned animals are descendants of the jack and jennet that the King of Spain famously sent to George Washington in 1785.

Aline Alija, a veterinarian in Mexico City, said donkeys have long been a "symbol of underdevelopment" because poor people owned them. She is working on a program, funded by British donkey protection associations, that sends teams of veterinarians into the Mexican countryside looking for neglected and overworked donkeys in need of medical attention.

Some farmers who shunned donkeys for the efficiency and status of more modern machines regret their haste.

"They are so useful and such hard workers," said Vazquez, who manages a ranch in this scenic town of 50,000. A few years back, his farm purchased a jack from Kentucky, who was mated with nine mares and produced nine strong mules. "We need more of them."

Felipe de Jesus Padilla Robles, 81, a farmer in Tala, said he always took good care of his donkey, whom he has now outlived. For years, he said, the two of them worked alongside each other in the sugar cane and corn fields. "We understood each other," he said.

As more farmers become nostalgic about their donkeys, the nation's largest annual donkey festival has surged in popularity. This year, 30,000 people attended the Otumba Donkey Festival, held May 1 near Mexico City.

The festival featured donkey polo, donkey racing and a costume contest in which burros were dressed as famous figures. They included Mexican President Vicente Fox and President Bush.