Domestic sheep

*Ovis aries domestica*

Fact Sheet

**Status:** Considered one of the few "American" breeds, the Navajo-Churro is categorized by American Livestock Breeds Conservancy as a “rare” breed.

**Distribution:** The Navajo-Churro was developed in the United States by Navajo Indians in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. The Churros are hardy and are known to thrive in the unrelenting heat of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States.

**Habitat:** Well suited to extremes of climate. Spend days and nights outside even when shelter is available. In the summertime, they are more likely to avail themselves of the shade.

**Diet:** hay and a little grain

**Length:** [These livestock are measured in weight].

**Weight:** Ewes range from 100-125 lbs.; rams 125-175 lbs

**Reproduction:** Twins and triplets are not uncommon and lambs are usually between 6-9 pounds at birth. These energetic lambs are on the move within 15-30 minutes after birth. Ewes prefer to be left alone during lambing and for some time after giving birth. They often keep their lambs apart from the flock until they are well bonded and the lambs strong enough to mingle with the others.

**Longevity:** A hardy breed.

**General Description:** Unlike most popular breeds, Navajo-Churro rams frequently have 4 well-developed horns, which is a particularly distinguishing characteristic of the breed. They are fine-boned and narrow-bodied with long legs carrying no wool. The Navajo-Churro fleece is a coarse outer coat over a shorter, finer inner coat. Colors range in black, white, gray or brown.

**Behavior:** The ewes give birth often and are fiercely protective of their young. Twins and triplets are not uncommon. They are typically very social and can be fed by hand, though some are more reclusive.

**Did you know?** The churro was the first domesticated sheep introduced into North America. It is a traditional Spanish sheep breed, imported in 1598, by the Spanish explorer Juan de Onate. Their name is Spanish for "scrub".

**Where you can find them?** On special farms for breeding, milking and wool.
Navajo-Churro

Origin
Navajo-Churro sheep are descended from the Churra, an ancient Iberian breed. Although secondary to the Merino, the Churra (later corrupted to "Churro" by American frontiersmen) was prized by the Spanish for its remarkable hardiness, adaptability and fecundity. The Churra was the very first breed of domesticated sheep in the New World. Its importation to New Spain by the Spanish dates back to the 16th century where it was used to feed and clothe the armies of the conquistadors and Spanish settlers.

History
By the 17th century the Churro had become the mainstay of Spanish ranches and villages along the upper Rio Grande Valley. Native Indians acquired flocks of Churro for food and fiber through raids and trading. Within a century, herding and weaving had become a major economic asset for the Navajo. It was from Churro wool that the early Rio Grande, Pueblo, and Navajo textiles were woven -- a fleece admired by collectors for its luster, silky hand, variety of natural color and durability.

An Endangered Breed
As early as 1789, the Spanish controlled the export of ewes from the provinces of New Mexico to maintain breeding stock. But in the 1850's thousands of Churro were trailed west to supply the California Gold Rush. Most of the remaining Churro of the Hispanic ranches were crossed with fine wool rams to supply the demand of garment wool caused by the increased population and the Civil War. Concurrently, in 1863, the U.S. Army decimated the Navajo flocks in retribution for continued Indian depredations. In the 1900's further "improvements" and stock reductions were imposed by U.S. agencies upon the Navajo flocks. True survivors were to be found only in isolated villages in Northern New Mexico and in remote canyons of the Navajo Indian Reservation.

Restorations of the Breed
In the 1970's several individuals began acquiring Churro phenotypes with the purpose of preserving the breed and revitalizing Navajo and Hispanic flocks. Criteria for the breed had been established from data collected for three decades (1936 - 1966) by the Southwestern Range and Sheep Breeding Laboratory at Fort Wingate, New Mexico. Several flocks have developed, and the Navajo Sheep Project has introduced cooperative breeding programs in some Navajo and Hispanic flocks.

What are Navajo-Churro Sheep Like
These sheep with their long staple of protective top coat and soft undercoat are well suited to extremes of climate. Some rams have four fully developed horns, a trait shared by few other breeds of the world. The Navajo-Churro is highly resistant to disease, and although it responds to individual attention, it needs no pampering to survive and prosper. The ewes lamb easily and are fiercely protective. Twins and triplets are not uncommon. The flavor of the meat is uncomparably superior, with a surprisingly low fat content.

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References:
Navajo-Churro Sheep Association, Box 94, Ojo Caliente, NM 87549.
Photographs:
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