

The Ethics of breeding Dohne Sheep

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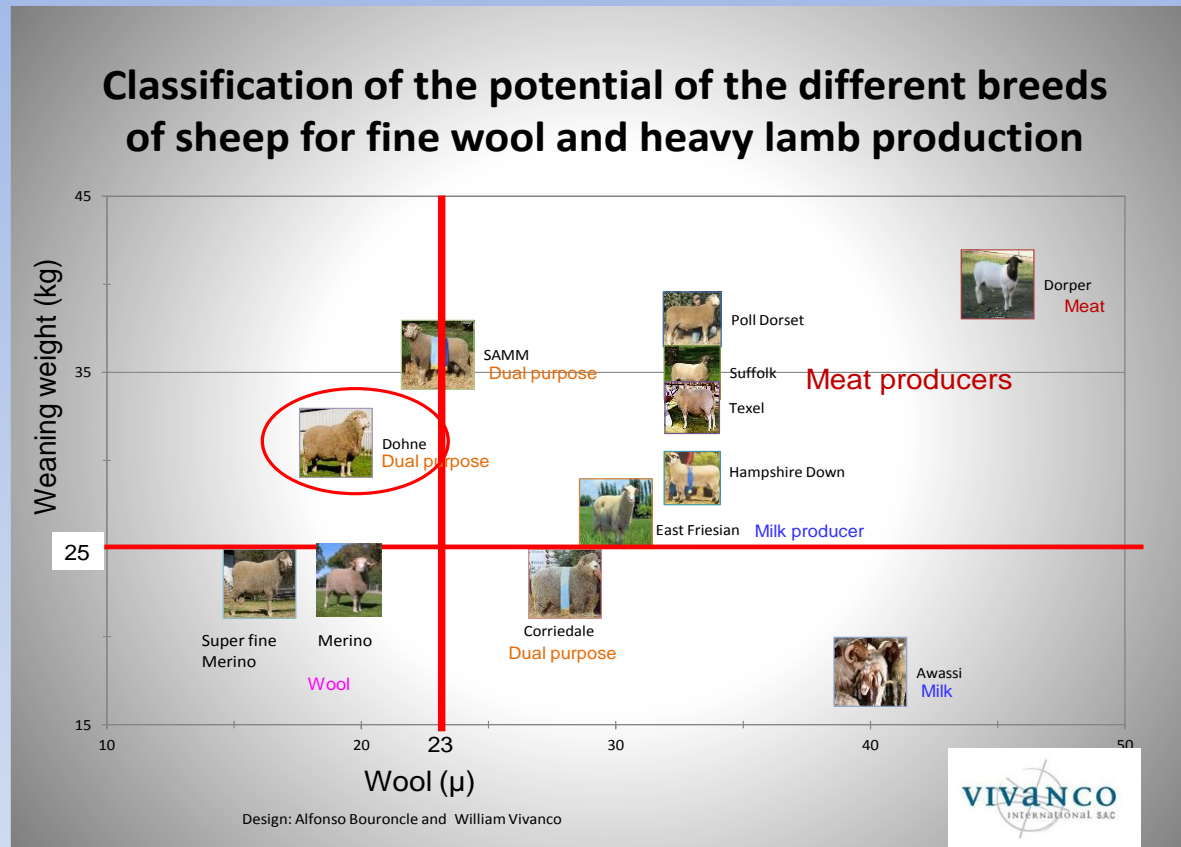


After 50 years of close involvement with the Dohne breed, I am convinced that Dohnes are the most productive sheep breed in the world.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence over my entire career has proved this in South Africa. Evidence in other countries has emerged in recent years to support this claim.

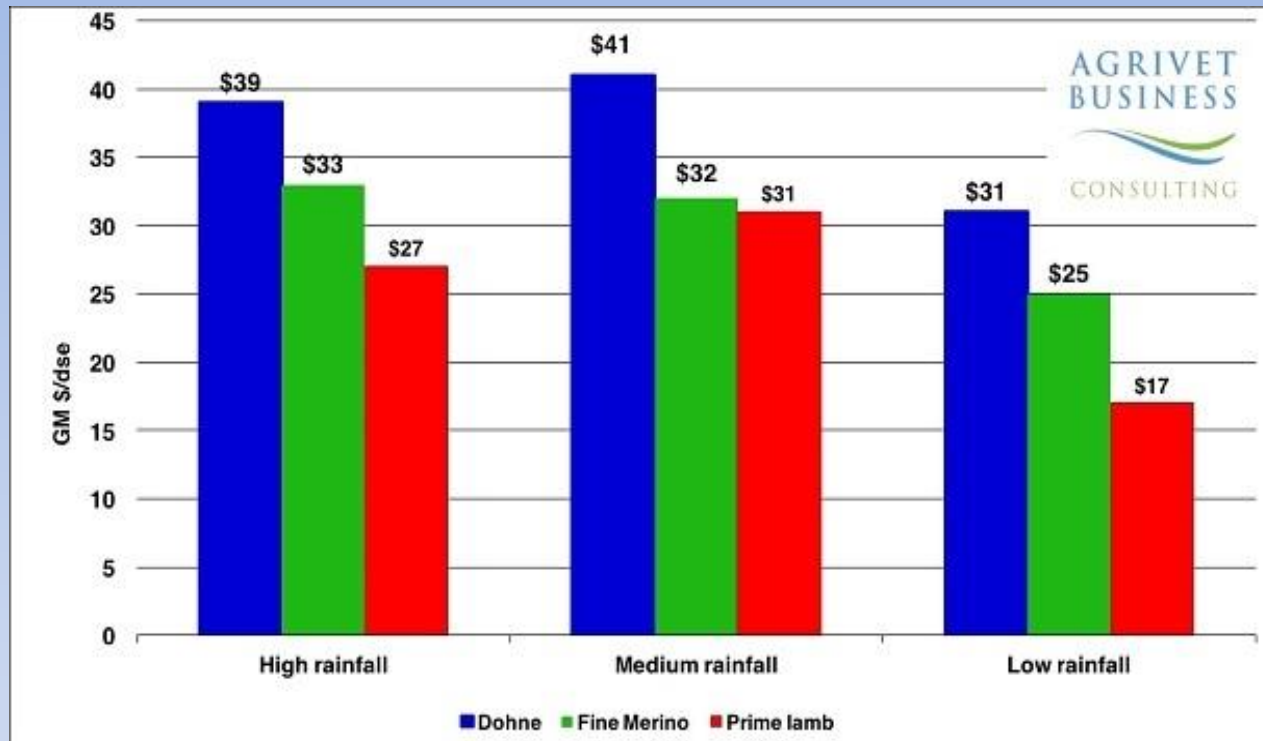


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In motivating an application for funding of the Dohne project in Peru, Dr William Vivanco compiled a diagram illustrating the potential of different breeds of sheep for fine wool and heavy lamb production. **Dohnes are clearly in the leading position.**

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Comparisons in Australia with Dohne, fine wool Merinos and a crossbred Prime Lamb enterprise run in three different environments, have proved Dohnes to be more profitable based on the last 10 year prices, whether run in high, medium or low rainfall environments (Lean, 2017).

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How did the Dohne Breed reach this elevated position?

It was born of necessity in a really harsh environment of low nutrition and heavy external and internal parasite load. The coarse native grassland of the Eastern Cape (Sourveld) is a very harsh environment for sheep.

After relentless selection based on measurement of the best performers over many years in this harsh environment, **a hardy and resilient breed emerged.**

When transferred to better environments, it excelled beyond all expectation.

We have designed and bred a unique animal unequalled in its ability to make money in all environments.

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Are our current breeders up to maintaining the high standards of the pioneers. Are we capable of raising the Dohne to even higher levels of productivity?

This will depend on the degree to which we follow the example of the pioneers and adhere to their ethics of breeding. .

At a very early stage, the South African Dohne Society developed a **Philosophy which served as a guideline and a blueprint for all to follow.**

The principles set out in this document are still valid today. They can serve as a measure of how well we conform today to the standards that were set at that time.

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Let us examine the Dohne Philosophy clause by clause and judge ourselves by its standards:

1. We select for maximum productivity in terms of reproduction, maternal ability, wool and lamb growth rate - using objectively measured performance in a low cost commercial environment.

1. Seleccionamos por máxima productividad, en términos de reproducción, habilidad materna, crecimiento de la lana y el cordero - usando el desempeño medido en forma objetiva en un ambiente comercial de bajo costo.

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In 1987 a panel of breeders singled out **Adaptability and Hardiness** as the most important characteristics responsible for the success of the Dohne.

This was confirmed in 1994 by a panel of breeders appointed to revise the selection index (see Birth of a breed, page 185).

The message was clear - select in a natural commercial environment to preserve and develop these traits.



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When we select on performance in harsh commercial environments, we are also selecting for the important trait of **resistance to stress.**

The result are attributes of the Dohne we all know and applaud:

- ✓ **More efficient utilisation of low quality feed,**
- ✓ **Non-selective grazing,**
- ✓ **Internal and external parasite resistance,**
- ✓ **Higher stocking rates,**
- ✓ **Maintenance of condition **and sustained high rates of reproduction and growth even in drought situations -****

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The substantial improvement in productivity and incomes after Dohnes are mated to local sheep breeds in severe environments like the Falkland Island and Patagonia confirms the potential of the Dohne in these situations:



Wool Production Potential (WPP%)

$$\text{WPP\%} = \frac{\text{Clean fleece} \times 100}{\text{Body weight at test age (12 months)}}$$

An important measurement of **fitness and hardiness**.
It has a direct influence on gross margins.

The optimum relationship between body and clean fleece weight at test age is crucial for the maintenance of fitness traits so vital for reproduction and growth.
(see Birth of a Breed, page 229)

The optimum WPP% is 5-6%
and it has been consistent at this level in South African Dohne studs for the past 10 years (Delpont, 2016).

Dohne Philosophy No. 2

2. Selection is based on economically important traits, the most important criterion being the measured relative efficiency of our sheep as producers of marketable produce.

2. La selección está basada en características de importancia económica, siendo el criterio más importante la medida de eficiencia relativa de nuestros ovinos como productores de productos comercializables.

This implies a serious commitment by Dohne breeders since 1970 to apply a comprehensive programme of pedigree and performance recording.

Regrettably there are reports of serious breaches of this fundamental requirement.

Dohne Philosophy No. 3

*3. We preserve and improve hardiness and adaptability by exposing the sheep under selection to a natural environment and by avoiding artificial feeding and housing of our breeding stock. **This practice precludes participation in competitive show classes in the traditional sense.***

*3. Preservamos y mejoramos la resistencia y adaptabilidad exponiendo a los ovinos bajo selección al ambiente natural y evitando la alimentación artificial y el encierro de nuestra majada. **Esta práctica se opone a la participación en exposiciones en el sentido tradicional.***

This is a natural development of the theme in clause 1.

How well do we adhere to this rule?

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In simple terms rams should be reared to test age in large mobs under the commercial paddock conditions where their progeny will ultimately be run.

This ensures equitable comparisons between individuals and accurate identification of those best adapted to the commercial environment.

There are many studs that take pride in offering rams for sale in natural veld (paddock) condition, the highly successful **Crux Dohne Stud in South Africa** being a good example. There are many other studs that follow this practice.



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According to the traditions and philosophy of the Dohne breed, competitive showing is not approved of or acceptable.



It grieves me to see that a sheep that was bred over a period of 75 years to be hardy and productive in harsh commercial conditions, is now treated elsewhere as a pampered pet with ribbons and halters.

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The opinion of a judge, who has no conception of the main traits that have made the Dohne the most productive woolled sheep we know, **is not an endorsement.**

The attributes of hardiness **can never be assessed in a show ring.**

The temptation to breed and select for the show ring rather than for the needs of commercial clients compromises the very reason for the existence of the breed.

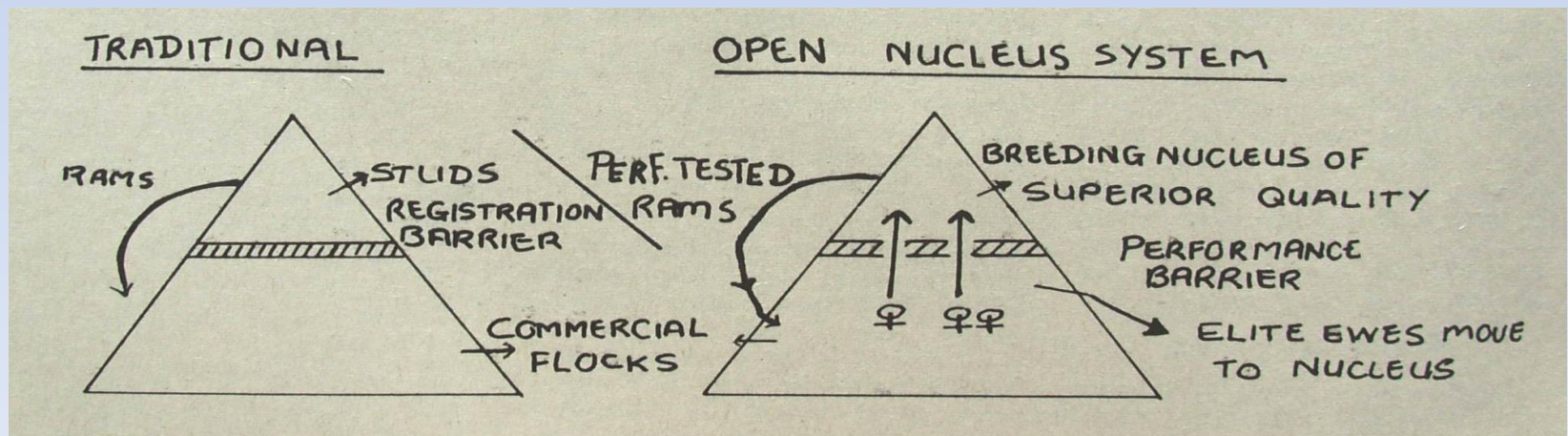
Enlist Nature as a partner (not a show judge) and observe the shape and type of animal that has evolved through selection on performance



Dohne Philosophy No. 4

4. We select within large flocks using the principles of population genetics and open nucleus breeding systems with a view to achieving the highest possible selection intensity.

4. Seleccionamos de grandes majadas usando los principios de genética de poblaciones y sistemas de apareamiento de núcleo abierto con la visión de alcanzar la mayor intensidad de selección posible.



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The Foundation flock register:

Based on the open-nucleus system, it was introduced in 1977. After complying with certain rules, a small proportion of top commercial ewes are elevated on performance to ram breeding flocks.



These ewes are valuable because they represent the very best on performance in large commercial flocks selected in a natural commercial environment, thus enhancing the hardiness and adaptability of our studs.

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World Record price for a Dohne Ram. South Africa 21 February 2018

R335 000 (US\$ 28 000)



It is significant that this ram has an F3 dam promoted from a very large commercial flock.

The breeders of the ram, Frans and Andries Marx, firmly believe that by promoting the very best ewes from their large commercial flock, they will enhance the hardiness and adaptability of the sheep in their stud

A fine testimony to the efficacy of the Foundation Flock register

Dohne Philosophy No. 5

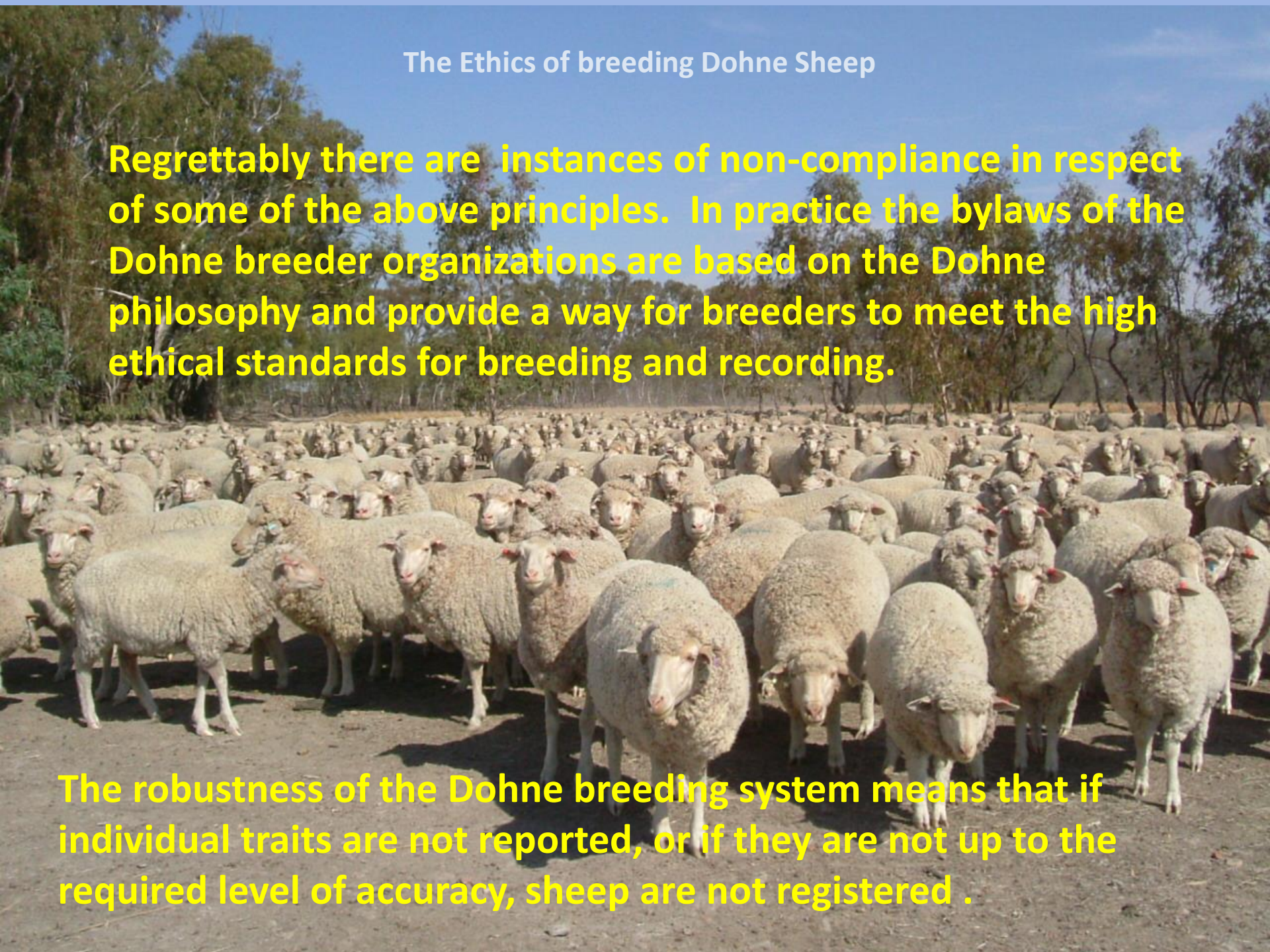
5. We progeny test every sire mated in stud flocks. Comprehensive individual performance and progeny records are kept in respect of every ewe and ram recorded by the Society. Animals achieving exceptional performance are used effectively and extensively in AI programmes where their superior breeding value is exploited.

5. Se realizan test de la progenie de todos los carneros usados en las cabañas. Se llevan registros detallados del desempeño individual y de la progenie de cada oveja y cada carnero registrado en la Sociedad. Los animales que alcanzan desempeños excepcionales se usan efectiva y extensivamente en programas de Inseminación Artificial donde su valor de cría superior es explotado.

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Regrettably there are instances of non-compliance in respect of some of the above principles. In practice the bylaws of the Dohne breeder organizations are based on the Dohne philosophy and provide a way for breeders to meet the high ethical standards for breeding and recording.

The robustness of the Dohne breeding system means that if individual traits are not reported, or if they are not up to the required level of accuracy, sheep are not registered .



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Ill-considered genetic infusion of other woolled sheep breeds to pursue short term objectives will compromise the very existence of the breed and will not be acceptable.

Another matter of concern in both South Africa and Australia is the fact that some breeders are **tardy in submitting data promptly as required by their terms of membership.**

Since all studs are linked through the genetics that are shared, this will negatively affect the data of those breeders who fully comply.

Promptness when submitting data is essential to maintain the credibility of the data upon which both breeders and their clients rely.

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These are serious breaches of the ethics of Dohne breeding.

Dohnes are held to be the benchmark of breeding excellence and integrity and are consistently advertised as such.



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Using Polled Merinos:

I believe the use of Polled Merino rams is a fatal error.

It will diminish much of the Dohne advantage in terms of reproduction and growth.

It will reduce the hardiness and resilience of the progeny which will very soon result in decreasing gross margins.

It will impact negatively on the crucial balance between wool and body weight and therefore the fitness attributes.

A possible increase of a few grammes of wool per sheep would over time be accompanied by a rapid reduction in the number and weight of lambs for sale and this would be a permanent loss of income.

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Crossing the Dohne with any other breed will reduce the performance of the progeny. It will impact negatively on the **crucial balance** between amount of wool produced and fitness attributes.

It took 75 years to develop the Dohne to where it is today. It is a concern for me, that some breeders believe they can re-invent the Dohne overnight.

It should be our mission **to keep the Dohne pure** and through careful selection and management, to continue to improve and enhance its performance.

There is empirical evidence confirms that **this is being achieved in pure flocks**. (Casey, 2015)

Dohne Philosophy No. 6

6. We apply a strict system of quality control and inspection in all ram breeding flocks, thus ensuring that only sheep which meet the required standard are used as flock replacements or offered for sale to the industry.

6. Aplicamos un sistema estricto de control de calidad e inspección en todas las majadas que producen carneros, lo que asegura que solamente los ovinos que cumplen con el estándar requerido son usados en la majada como reemplazos y ofrecidos para la venta a la industria.

This is a **fundamental requirement** wherever Dohnes are bred and much effort has been put into the training of Dohne assessors over the years. This is the reason why **commercial clients have come to trust the Dohne system.**

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Thousands of stud and commercial breeders, sheep and wool professionals and students have attended our workshops over the years.

Training is still being done by persons like Dr Delport and Allan Casey.



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To preserve the integrity of the system, it is incumbent on all assessors to maintain the highest ethical standards .

They must decline to assess or approve sheep they suspect are:

- not pure Dohnes,
- have questionable records
- or lack the mandatory performance and pedigree requirements (Requirements set out in the bye-laws of the various Dohne breeder's associations).

Such sheep should also **not be allowed to be sold as approved Dohne sheep** on any official or on-property sale held under the auspices of the various Societies.

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Dohne Philosophy No. 7

7. We provide buyers of Dohne Merinos with comprehensive information related to the relative productivity of every animal offered for sale - information which enables them to rapidly achieve the objectives they have set.

7. Proveemos a los compradores de Merino Dohne con información completa relacionada a la productividad relativa de cada animal ofrecido a la venta - información que les permite alcanzar rápidamente los objetivos que se han fijado.

Every Dohne ram breeder, when joining a breeder's association, made a signed commitment to abide by the breeding principles and rules of the Association.

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In South Africa we have adhered to this philosophy and the acceptance and application of the principles set out in this document are not questioned.

At current high wool prices we are also faced with some commercial clients switching to Merino rams. This is a temporary phenomenon not justified by the ratio of total flock income from meat compared to wool.

Wool prices might drop. Lamb prices will rise.

**Commercial breeders making wrong decisions will
seriously lose out.**

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Even at current high wool prices, breeders achieving a reproduction rate of 130% and more, will earn 80% of total flock income from meat and only 20% from wool.

"The commercial breeder hasn't been educated in the use and value of ASBV's and our breeding system and philosophy" (John Nadin, personal communication)

We have the responsibility to continue with an intensive campaign to educate and inform our clients about the **Dohne Advantage.**

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The philosophy ends with this good advice

*BY USING DOHNE MERINOS YOU TOO CAN PLUG INTO THIS
POWERFUL SOURCE OF HIGHER PRODUCTIVITY*

**USANDO MERINO DOHNE USTED TAMBIEN PUEDE
CONECTARSE A ESTA PODEROSA FUENTE DE MAYOR
PRODUCTIVIDAD**



The Ethics of breeding Dohne Sheep

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