

Absolute adaptation to Africa

By JODIE RINTOUL

IF an Australian beef producer was to look at Nguni cattle the only thing they would probably appreciate would be their speckled hide.

But while the breed may have an odd appearance and not meet many of the requirements of the modern day beef breeds, this indigenous breed to Africa has a special place in the South African beef industry.

The breed has evolved over centuries to be in harmony with the environment and this was one of the many traits which attracted Cedric and Rene Stoch, who farm at Malmesbury, north of Cape Town in the Western Cape, to the breed in 1970 when they were breeding Angus.

Cedric said the build of the Nguni and their softness on the environment, made the pastures last longer.

"They walk on their pasterns, which are soft so they do very little damage to the soils and the environment, which makes them ideal," he said.

The breed is classified as Sanga cattle and has been described more as a respiratory type with conformation more like a dairy, than a beef animal.

Historians seem to agree Sanga cattle evolved about 1600BC in present day Ethiopia and Somalia from crosses between Zebu and humpless Hermitic long horn cattle.

Recent research indicates the Sanga's origin could be entirely African.

The Nguni name refers to the original progenitors of the present day Nguni people, who migrated from north, central and east Africa with their Sanga cattle, crossing the Zambezia between 590 and 700AD.

The present day cattle have therefore had more than 1200 years to adapt to the environmental extremes of not only southern Africa, but also Central and East Africa as well.

During the migration, the



□ Cedric Stoch believes the best attributes of the Nguni breed are longevity, fertility and disease resistance.

breed travelled through areas rife with Nagana, East Coast fever and many other endemic diseases, and have survived seasonal as well as periodic droughts.

This period of adaptation - coupled with other survival mechanisms developed during their epic journey through Africa - makes the breed one of the hardest known to man and worthy of a place in modern beef production systems.

Today the Stochs run 450 breeders on 316 hectares of clover and medic-based pasture, which includes their Tafelsig stud on their 830ha property.

Cedric said there were many positives for the breed,

including smaller cows, their ability to handle the environment, lack of calving issues, mothering ability, longevity, fertility, disease resistance to tick borne diseases, their crossbreeding ability and good health of weaners in feedlots.

"The cows are much smaller than many other breeds and weigh between 380 and 420kg, which means we can run more," Cedric said.

"With the Nguni we can run up to two cows a hectare, while with the Angus, we couldn't run anymore than 0.8 cows/ha."

While the Nguni cow may only be small and look more suitable to dairying, the bull is

generally well-muscled with medium-sized bulls weighing between 500 and 800kg.

Another real asset of the breed is its calving ease and mothering ability.

Cedric said purebred calves usually have a birthweight of between 28 and 29kg.

"I have never experienced any calving problems or had to pull a calf, since changing to the breed," he said.

"With the Angus we used to pull up to 60 per cent of the calves and as a result used to calve under electric lights.

"While the calves may be born small they are very hardy and renowned for their get up and go, which is another good trait.

"Two-day-old calves can walk up to 10 kilometres."

Calving on the property occurs from May through to August and then the Stochs try to wean their calves at 55 per cent of the cow's weight, which is about 180kg in January to March.

The cows are also very good mothers and very protective of their calves.

"When predators threaten the cattle and calves, the mothers will round up the calves in a circle and close ranks and drive the predators away," Cedric said.

Fertility is also not an issue with the breed and they show early sexual maturity.

As a result the Stochs run bulls in with the heifers from weaning with the aim of all the heifers having their first calf by two-years-old.

This year they mated 118 heifers to one bull and when they were pregnancy-tested, only 16 were not in calf, highlighting the highly fertile nature of the breed.

The Stochs leave the bulls in with the cows permanently and Cedric said their main mating time was from August through to November with September being the peak.

"Their heat cycles depend on day temperature and day

