

# Draft Cattle Use in the regions of Braşov, Buzău and the Apuseni Mountains, Romania

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## Abstract

Romania is one of the few countries in Europe that still has a vibrant culture of draft animals, and draft horses continue to play an enormous role in agriculture in remote low mountain regions. Nevertheless, the use of draft cattle is under enormous pressure, and there has been a dramatic decline in the number of teams in use. A survey project conducted in three regions takes a look at the complex reasons for this development and at the same time highlights individual aspects that are still characteristic for the use of draft cattle in Romania today.

## Résumé

La Roumanie est l'un des rares pays d'Europe où la culture des animaux de trait est encore très vivante, et les chevaux de trait continuent à jouer un rôle considérable dans l'agriculture des régions montagneuses reculées. Néanmoins, l'utilisation des bovins de trait est soumise à une pression énorme, et le nombre d'attelages utilisés a considérablement diminué. Une enquête menée dans trois régions examine les raisons complexes de cette évolution et met en évidence certains aspects qui caractérisent encore aujourd'hui l'utilisation des bovins de trait en Roumanie..

## Kurzfassung

Als eines der wenigen Länder in Europa hat Rumänien noch eine lebendige Zugtierkultur und die Rolle von Zugrindern für die Landwirtschaft in abgelegenen Mittelgebirgsregionen ist weiter enorm. Nichtsdesto trotz steht die Nutzung von Zugrindern unter enormem Druck und es ist ein dramatischer Rückgang eingesetzter Gespanne zu verzeichnen. Ein in drei Regionen durchgeführtes Surveyvorhaben wirft ein Blick in die vielschichtigen Gründe für diese Entwicklung und beleuchtet zugleich Einzelaspekte, die für die Nutzung von Zugrindern in Rumänien bis heute charakteristisch sind.

## Resumen

Rumanía es uno de los pocos países de Europa que aún conserva una cultura ganadera muy viva y el papel del ganado vacuno en la agricultura de las remotas regiones montañosas sigue siendo enorme. Sin embargo, el uso del ganado de tiro está sometido a una enorme presión y se ha registrado un drástico descenso en el número de yuntas en uso. Un proyecto de encuesta realizado en tres regiones analiza las complejas razones de esta evolución y, al mismo tiempo examina cada uno de los aspectos que siguen siendo característicos del uso del ganado de tiro en la Rumanía actual.





Tab. 1 Illustrated table showing the various regional cattle varieties in the study area.

Introduction

Romania is one of the few countries in Europe that still has a very lively draft cattle culture<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, there are no concrete surveys on the current status of draft cattle farming. As a result, it is difficult to assess the actual situation beyond generally emerging trends towards decline. In 2021, in cooperation with the Romanian photographer Vlad Dumitrescu, there was an opportunity to take a closer look at three selected regions during field trips. These were Braşov County (central Romania), Buzău County (south-eastern Romania) and the Apuseni Mountains (western Romania). The aim of the visits was to identify as many draft cattle farmers as possible in these regions and to interview them using a standardized form<sup>2</sup>.

1 See Baskerville, in this volume.  
2 The form was developed by the author and used in the same way for other surveys (e.g. for Northern Uganda and Namibia). See Kropp/ Simataa and Kropp/Okumu in this volume.

The following key points were to be recorded:

- Occupation, age
- Number of draft cattle in use (incl. sex)
- Breed<sup>3</sup>
- Areas of use
- Type of harnessing

In addition, subjective assessments of the respondents should be recorded for the following questions:

- Reasons for working with draft cattle
- Current problems and challenges in relation to the use of draft cattle

The results of the surveys will be presented in more detail below and finally contextualized.

3 Here, regionally predominant names were documented; it was not always possible to assign them precisely to a breed; there also appear to be regional varieties.



## Braşov County (Central Romania)

As part of the preparations for the survey, extensive re-search was initially carried out in the county to find out where there was evidence that draft cattle were no longer being used. It became clear that in addition to Braşov city there were no draft cattle to be expected especially in the northern part of the district, so that the survey should mainly focus on the low mountain ranges in the east and west. It was also decided to include communities in the border regions of neighbouring districts as well. Finally, the following localities were visited in the period from June 4 to June 22, 2021: Vulcăniţa, Şinca Veche, Şinca Nouă, Lunca Câlnicului, Holbav (Braşov county); Mărcuş, Dobârlău, Bicfalău, Chichiş (Covasna county); Dragoslavele (Argeş county).

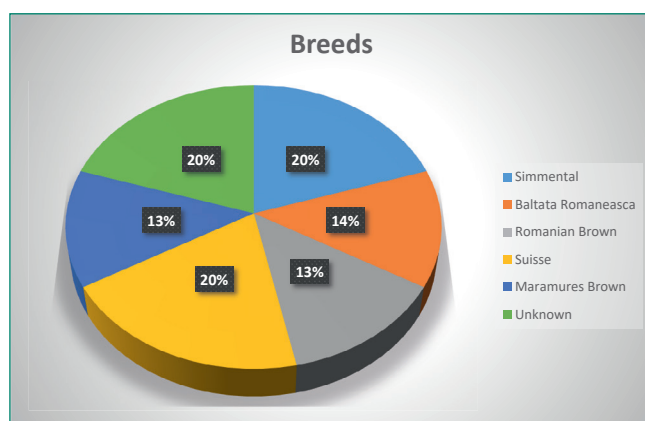


Fig. 1 Distribution of cattle breeds for the Braşov study area.

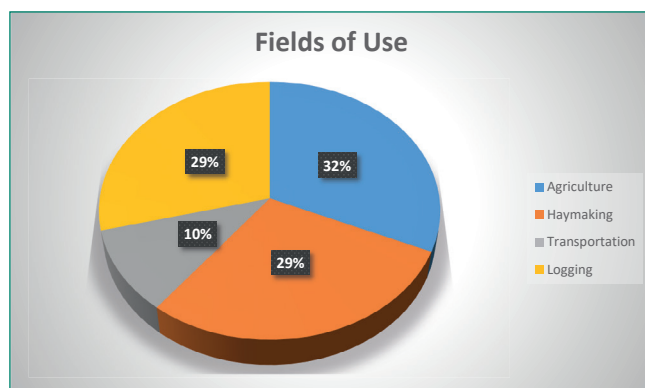


Fig. 2 Fields of use of draft cattle for the Braşov study area.

A total of 13 questionnaires were successfully completed and evaluated (see Fig. 1 and 2). A total of 26 draft cattle were identified in the region, all of which were ox teams that were also worked exclusively with the double withers yoke. The average age of the draft cattle farmers was 64.5 years, and all but one of the interviewees described themselves as farmers. All respondents were also male.



Fig. 3 A team of oxen in Braşov County during the survey tour 2021 (Picture: Vlad Dumitrescu).

## Buzău County (South-eastern Romania)

The survey took place between July 9 and 11, 2021 and proved to be more difficult than in the first study area due to the poor condition of the roads and paths and the rough terrain. It sometimes took several hours of walking to reach the individual draft cattle farmers. For these reasons, it was not possible to exhaustively record all active owners of this region during the survey period. Nevertheless, a representative cross-section was achieved.

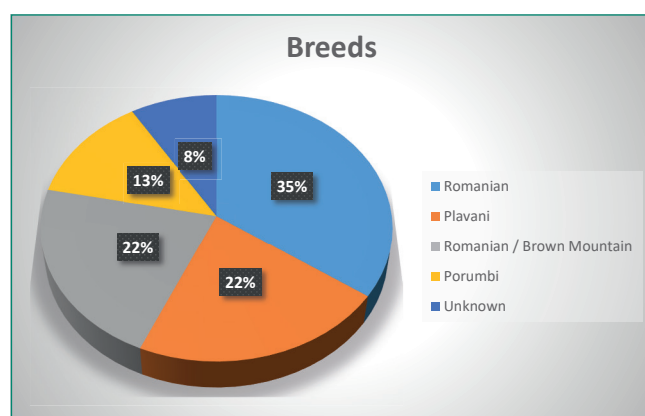


Fig. 4 Distribution of cattle breeds for the Buzău study area.

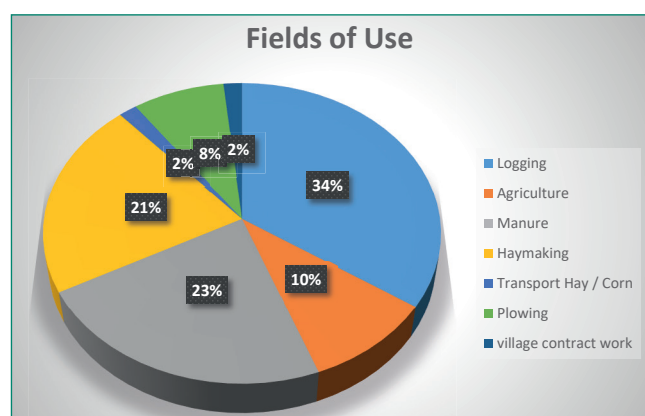


Fig. 5 Fields of use of draft cattle for the Buzău study area.



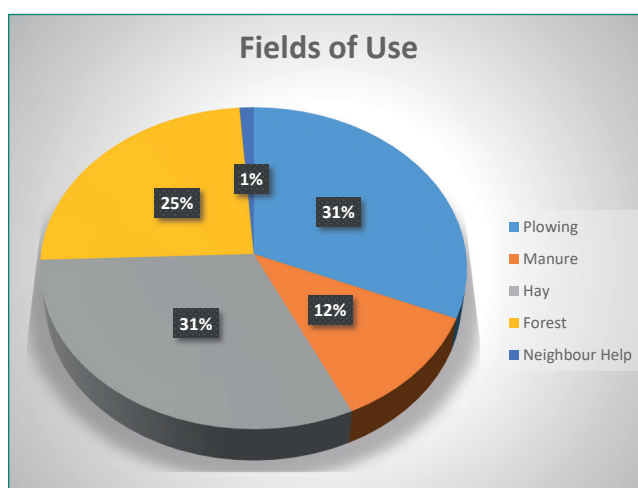


**Fig. 6** Hay transport in the Buzau region during the survey tours in July 2021 (Picture: Vlad Dumitrescu).

A total of 23 questionnaires were completed and evaluated for the district (see Fig. 4 and 5). 58 draft cattle were documented, with a total of 54 oxen and four cows. Unlike in Braşov, there were also several owners with more than a single team. All animals were worked in the double withers yoke. The average age of the draft cattle farmers was 57.3 years. The vast majority of respondents described themselves as farmers; in two cases, the profession of forester was also mentioned. The draft cattle farmers identified in the study area were all male.

### Apuseni Mountains (Western Romania)

The last of the three study areas was visited in September 2021. As in Buzău, road conditions were sometimes poor and it was very difficult to reach the draft cattle farmers. For this reason, it was not possible to conduct a complete survey here either, only a representative cross-section. A total of 28 questionnaires were completed. The average age of the draft cattle farmers in this case was 54.42 years. Apart from one fireman and one shepherd, all other respondents described themselves as farmers. As in study area one, only oxen were kept in the Apuseni Mountains. It is interesting to note that a total of 24% of respondents owned four draft oxen - a significantly higher percentage than for the other regions.



**Fig. 7** Fields of use of draft cattle for the Apuseni Mountain study area.

It is also worth mentioning that greater conformity was observed among the cattle breeds; 90% of the cattle were identified as belonging to the Baltata Romaneasca breed. The remaining ten percent were described by the respondents as crossbreeds. As in the other study areas, all cattle in the Apuseni Mountains were harnessed exclusively with the withers yoke.





**Fig. 8** Young draft cattle farmer in the Apuseni survey region in 2021 (Picture: Vlad Dumitrescu).

## Overarching problems for draft cattle farmers

Regardless of the individual study areas, the questionnaires also identified a number of overarching problems for draft cattle farmers in Romania. For example, a central problem for many of the respondents is that, unlike in the past, draft cattle can no longer be used profitably. Especially the use in the area of neighbourly help, in the context of contract work (transport and plowing services), has decreased enormously and many of the cattle were accordingly described as “underutilized”. This impression was confirmed during several interviews conducted by the authors with former draft cattle farmers in the Braşov study area in April 2023. Many of them ultimately stopped keeping cattle precisely because of this underutilization. The second frequently cited problem of feeding costs for draft cattle should also be seen in close connection with this. It is therefore not (or no longer) possible to adequately finance the winter feeding costs.

When asked why, despite the problems mentioned, the respondents still decided to keep draft cattle, the answers were always the same across the three study areas: On the one hand, the animals were used because the inaccessibility of the study areas (e.g. road conditions, extremely steep terrain) meant that modern machinery could only be used to a limited extent or not at all. On the other hand, many interviewees mentioned the great importance of draft cattle for Romania's cultural heritage; more than one interviewee gave quotes such as “a life without draft cattle is unimaginable for me”.



**Fig. 9** In rare cases (here in the Apuseni region), women can be seen working with draft cattle as well (Picture: Vlad Dumitrescu).

A danger to the preservation of the draft animal culture that should not be underestimated is certainly to be found in the fact that many skills are being lost with the death of the older generation of ox drivers. Even if young people want to start working with draft animals again, there is a lack of people who can teach them these skills. That is why it is so important to preserve the existing culture—as an investment in the future.

## Summary

The study has shown that the draft cattle culture in Romania is under enormous pressure and that more and more important parameters such as infrastructure and utilization spectra are failing. Although it can be recognized that – the more remote the region – working with draft cattle remains important and that even younger people continue to practice this culture, a dramatic collapse can nonetheless be observed overall. According to an oral statement by one of the draft cattle farmer interviewed in Holbav (Braşov district), 100 teams were still being used there in the early 2000s – currently (as of 2025) there are only two left.

The extent to which this trend can be reversed remains questionable. It is possible that the circular economy practised by small farmers in the low mountain regions could receive more support from the national government. High-value nature farming, which involves the use of draft cattle and horses, is a key factor in the preservation of the outstanding biodiversity in these regions. If the management of steep slopes with the help of draft animals is discontinued, all that remains is succession and reforestation – with all the associated consequences.







**Fig. 10** The mosaic like cultural landscape in the low mountain ranges is a key factor for high biodiversity and is often only possible to maintain with the help of draft animals (Picture: Vlad Dumitrescu).

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