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HERD THE MOOS? LATVIA'S SYMBOLIC BLUE COW BACK FROM THE BRINK



Latvian blue cows graze on a pasture at Riga Zoo's affiliate Ciruli in Kalvene, Latvia. —AFP photos



A Latvian blue cow (left) rests next to Highland cows at a pasture of Riga Zoo's affiliate Ciruli in Kalvene, Latvia.

Once a rarity, cows with light blue or dark ultramarine hides may again be glimpsed grazing on the Latvian countryside among the regular brown, black or white spotted cattle. The unique and hardy breed, driven to near extinction during the Soviet era, has made a comeback over the last few decades as an unlikely symbol of Latvian national identity.

"Their worst days are over," said Arnis Bergmanis, head of the Ciruli animal park in the village of Kalvene, which serves as a breeding facility for the cattle. "Blue cows are unique and wonderful. I'm glad we can help them thrive," he told AFP while examining a baby calf. In 2000 there were only 18 blue cows in Latvia, but today they number around 1,500 — thoroughbreds as well as hybrids.

Originally found only on the Baltic coast in the Kurzeme region, they are increasingly popular in central areas too. "We are happy to help every

new farmer or guesthouse owner get their own special blue cow," Bergmanis said. Rural innkeepers acquire the cattle as a tourist attraction, while farmers include a token blue cow in their herd for its strong maternal instinct. "If a calf of any color loses its mother or gets separated, the blue cow will take the calf and raise it as its own," Bergmanis said.

Cultural symbol

Blue cows evolved on the coast, where they led a spartan lifestyle, able to subsist on bush branches and dune grass — fodder considered inedible by other cattle. Legend has it that they get their color from the sea, though in fact they are born almost beige. Their coat soon turns blue however and gets darker with the years.

The pigment also influences the muscular tissue, producing beef that is exceptionally dark, though their numbers have always been too low for meat sales on a mass scale. When the communists came to power under the Soviet occupation, they put an emphasis on mass production of beef and dairy. They favored more generic cattle, causing the blue cow to almost go extinct.

But theatre, of all things, saved the day. Following the highly popular 1970s play "The Blue One" by Latvian playwright Gunars Priede, the special cattle returned to public consciousness, becoming a symbol of vanishing national identity. In 2006, farmers, scientists and enthusiasts founded the Blue Cow Association to safeguard the breed. The government meanwhile offers special subsidies for owners of blue cows.

'Strong, independent'

Blue cows provide less milk than your average cattle — around 5,000 liters (1,300 gallons) per

cow per year compared to 8,000 for the Holstein breed — but the milk is healthier and more nutritious. They also stand out for their ability to thrive in harsh conditions, according to Daiga Simkevica, head of the Blue Cow Association. "The strong, independent and robust blue cow can live all year round outdoors, even during the winter frosts, which many other cattle breeds can't endure," she told AFP.

The Blue Cow Association organizes seminars for farmers, keeps meticulous records to avoid inbreeding, works to keep the population growing and also does research on the cattle. "In the future we hope to carry out full DNA analysis to identify those genes that are unique to the blue cow," Simkevica said. "We've never had a blue cow catch the bovine leukosis virus, therefore we hope to identify genes that might benefit all other cows too." —AFP



A breeding bull of the Latvian blue breed is pictured at Riga Zoo's affiliate Ciruli in Kalvene, Latvia.



Latvian blue cows feed on hay at Riga Zoo's affiliate Ciruli in Kalvene, Latvia.

Having pets not kids robs us of 'humanity': Pontiff

Pope Francis risked the ire of the world's childless dog and cat owners yesterday, suggesting people who substitute pets for kids exhibit "a certain selfishness". Speaking on parenthood during a general audience at the Vatican, Francis lamented that pets "sometimes take the place of children" in society. "Today... we see a form of selfishness," said the pope. "We see that some people do not want to have a child.

"Sometimes they have one, and that's it, but they have dogs and cats that take the place of children. This may make people laugh but it is a reality." The practice, said the head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, "is a denial of fatherhood and motherhood and diminishes us, takes away our humanity". Thus, "civilization grows old without humanity because we lose the richness of fatherhood and motherhood, and it is the country that suffers", the pontiff said at the Paul VI Hall.

Francis has been photographed petting dogs, allowed a baby lamb to be draped over his shoul-



Pope Francis arrives to hold a general audience at the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican yesterday. —AFP

ders during Epiphany in 2014 and even petted a tiger and a baby panther. But while his predecessor, Benedict XVI, was a cat lover, Francis is not known to have a pet at his Vatican residence. In 2014, Francis told Il Messaggero daily that having pets instead of children was "another phenomenon of cultural degradation", and that emotional relationships with pets was "easier" than the "complex" relationship between parents and children.

Yesterday, while inviting couples who are unable to have children for biological reasons to consider adoption, he urged potential parents "not to be afraid" in embarking on parenthood. "Having a child is always a risk, but there is more risk in not having a child, in denying paternity," he said. The Argentine pontiff has in the past denounced the "demographic winter", or falling birth rates in the developed world. Earlier this year, he criticized modern society, in which career and money-making trumps building a family for many, calling such mentality "gangrene for society". —AFP

Dutch cow farmers face tough climate choices

In the flat expanse of the Dutch countryside, Corne de Rooij nostalgically strokes the muzzles of his calves, wondering how long he will be able to keep them. Livestock farming is one of the main emitters of greenhouse gases in the Netherlands, where climate change threatens to swallow up the low-lying fields.

"It's my passion and my life," the reserved 53-year-old says in a small voice in his stable in the southern Netherlands, where he raises calves and chickens. "If we have to stop raising them, it will hurt." Dutch farmers have found themselves pushed to the wall by the government, which is offering them a final choice to make their farms more climate-friendly, or change jobs. The new coalition government wants to release 25 billion euros (\$28 billion) by 2035 to help reduce herd sizes and reduce emissions of nitrogen, a greenhouse gas emitted particularly by fertilizers and manure.

The small, densely populated country of 17.5 million people is also densely populated with animals: nearly four million cattle, 12 million pigs and 100 million chickens. The Netherlands is the world's second biggest agricultural exporter after the United States, but agriculture is responsible for 16 percent of the Netherlands' greenhouse gas emissions. Cows are also major emitters of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, from their digestive systems.

'Uncertainty is huge'

The government aims to help farmers diversify their business, to retrain, to innovate or even to relocate if their farm is near a protected natural area. But if they fail to comply, the government has warned it could even take the very sensitive step of expropriating land from recalcitrant farmers. The government insists it has no choice. Huge construction projects aimed at tackling a housing shortage have already been suspended by the supreme court in a case brought by environmental groups over greenhouse gas emissions.

By pushing the agricultural sector to accelerate the climate transition, the government hopes to be able to resume some of these building projects, while reducing nitrogen emissions by 50 percent by 2030. Overall, the Dutch have realised that their country is too small to do everything at once: farming, a huge flower producing industry, one of Europe's biggest airports at Schiphol in Amsterdam, a dense road network, housing for everyone plus, in the middle of it all, nature zones.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte's new coalition — his fourth — does not specifically mention reducing herd sizes, but it is a measure that has long been under consideration and has sparked the anger of the farming sector. Farmers, who have often been in the business for generations, have for years felt left out and lost, says de Rooij, who is based in the village of Riel, in the southern province of Brabant, near the Belgian border.

"The uncertainty is huge" for him and his colleagues, who he says are constantly confronted with new rules which require more investment. The latest edict will cost him nearly a million euros to make his barns climate neutral. De Rooij says farming has become an "easy victim" that the Dutch government always points the finger at first, even if he says he is "obviously concerned" by climate change. "But give us time and money" and "clear objectives", he says.

'Starting blocks'

The main Dutch farming union, LTO, says the government is right to release billions of euros to make the sector more sustainable. But it criticizes the fact that more money has been earmarked to compensate farmers who stop, than to encourage those who want to stay on. "Farmers can see the change in the climate, they can see what they have to do, and they want to do it — but there is a cost," LTO president Sjaak van der Tak told AFP. "We are in the starting blocks, but society and politics has to make this transition possible." Until then, Corne de Rooij is learning to live with uncertainty. "I know quite a few colleagues who think they would be better off quitting, because in the Netherlands, you don't know which foot to dance on," he said. "The politicians have to get their feet back on the ground." —AFP

'WHAT A LIFE!': MORENO REFLECTS AS NEW OSCARS BID LOOMS

It took Rita Moreno a year to agree to a documentary about her career. When she finally watched it for the first time, she exclaimed to her daughter: "What a life I've had!" The Puerto Rican superstar's seven decades in show business have earned her Emmys, a Grammy, a Tony and an Oscar — the rare "EGOT" feat, achieved by only 16 artists ever. Moreno is the only Latina among them, having overcome racism and sexual abuse in Hollywood long before #MeToo, as well as a tumultuous romance with Marlon Brando.

Now a happy mother and grandmother, she is the subject of "Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It" on Netflix, which traces the ups and downs of a life often seen to embody the "American Dream." And at 90 she is back on the big screen thanks to "West Side Story," Steven Spielberg's remake of the film that won her an Oscar in 1962 — which could now earn her another.

Having won best supporting actress all those decades ago as the feisty Anita, Moreno steps into a new role as Valentina, while her former character is played by young Broadway star Ariana DeBose. "That was very difficult for me,"

Moreno told AFP, describing a scene where Valentina rescues Anita from sexual assault. "I've gotta tell you it was surreal, very strange. Difficult. Exciting. "My brain was telling me 'no, no, no, that's not Anita. You're Anita! I had to tell my brain, 'No, I'm not Anita any more.'"

'No role models'

Moreno was born in Puerto Rico in 1931. She emigrated with her mother to New York when she was five, where her dancing opened doors to the entertainment industry. "At the time there were no role models for girls like me," so she chose Elizabeth Taylor, Moreno recalled. She made her Broadway debut at 13, and soon after found herself in the movies.

On the big screen she received endless "ethnic" roles. Not even her Oscar for "West Side Story," in which her skin was painted darker, would end the type-casting. But she continued to expand her career in theater and on television, becoming a role model for today's Latino stars like Lin-Manuel Miranda, Gloria Estefan and Eva Longoria. They and others speak of Moreno's inspiring work in the new documentary, which elicits laughter and admiration as well as



In this file photo, actress Rita Moreno presents the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film during the 90th Annual Academy Awards show in Hollywood, California. —AFP

tears. "I promised myself that I was going to be as honest as I could be," said Moreno.

Despite decades on the screen, she admitted it was difficult to open up about behind-the-scenes strife in her marriage to US cardiologist Leonard Gordon, who died in 2010. "It was the first and only time on set that I had to ask them to cut

because I was going to cry." Moreno is more visceral when discussing Brando, with whom she had a passionate eight-year relationship. "Have you ever been so obsessed by somebody that you feel as if you can't breathe without them? That's how Marlon felt about himself," she quips. "He was the daddy I couldn't please," adds Moreno.

'Nervous'

These days, Moreno lives in California, enjoys cooking and makes a gazpacho "to die for." But the next few months are unlikely to be quiet, as anticipation mounts that Moreno could be in line for a second Oscar for the new "West Side Story." That could potentially pit her against her young co-star DeBose. "Ariana will be nervous that I got nominated, that's what I think, because she thinks 'Oh wow, it's Rita Moreno,'" she told AFP, flitting between Spanish and English. "And I'm thinking 'no, no, no, you played Anita, not me, and you deserve it.'... She was fabulous, she was divine."

The pair both earned supporting actress nods from the Critics Choice Awards and Golden Globes, with the Oscars still to come. "I called Steven Spielberg and said 'What should I do? Should I show up to these things?'" Moreno recalled, worrying that her presence could make DeBose "nervous." "He said: 'Absolutely, you must show up just to show that everybody is friendly with everybody in the cast... you were chosen, you need to be there.'" —AFP