

(GOAT NOISES)

Meghan: *Several years ago, the animal behind these sounds went viral.*

People called it “goat monster” and one person said it “looked like a goat wearing a goat costume.”

This...is the Damascus goat.

And before we go further, you might want to google it.

It is QUITE a looker.

I’m Meghan Mast and this is Relief, development and podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Meghan: *Today on the show, we explore the mystery..of why the Damascus goat looks the way it does and why an MCC partner in Lebanon chose to distribute this goat.*

I’m going to pass the mic now to my colleague Colin Friesen, donor engagement assistant for MCC Canada, who will take it from here.

Colin: *Yeah so I first learned about this goat when the donor relations staff were planning a trip to Lebanon.*

And we were planning to visit this MCC partner called Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (or LOST, as it’s abbreviated). LOST distributes these goats to families in Lebanon to help families earn more income, and we were really excited to see the goats and learn more about the project.

And Kate, one of the country reps that was hosting our tour, warned us that the goats we’d see on this trip were kinda unusual looking, kinda weird.

So instantly we wanted to google that because we were like, what do you mean?

And the images that popped up on the Google search engine—I mean, honestly my first thought was that it looked like a bantha from Star Wars.

It didn’t have big horns, and it looked less hairy and it kind of also like a camel but also with a really weird face. And that just intrigued us. And it made me wonder are there reasons our partners choose these goats?

And so, one of the first things I found when I started looking into it more was [an article in Newsweek](#) by journalist Kristin Hugo.

Kristin: *“Yes, I’m Kristin Hugo. So, I’m a science journalist. I’ve written for a bunch of places like National Geographic, Newsweek, PBS news hour, by Nature, and my current job is I’m writing a book for the publisher MIT press called, “Carcas: The afterlife of animal bodies.”*

Colin: *I was curious what Kristin thought when she first saw the Damascus goat...*

Kristin: *You know, I follow a lot of groups on Facebook and Tumblr that post a lot of, you know, interesting content. And so when I saw the Damascus, Damascus goat, like a particular one that was sort*

of gaining traction, I wasn't really shocked, honestly, because I had probably seen one before at some point. You know, I see a lot of weird animals online. It certainly was a pretty odd one. So there's sort of a viral video of a big brown one with a very pronounced like, weird face.

Colin: *Their faces look flattened or squished. They have these short noses, which made Kristin wonder whether they would be considered this big fancy scientific word called brachycephalic... "bracy" meaning shortened and "cephalic" meaning head, so put the two together and you've got "shortened head."*

Kristin: And I haven't been able to, so I did try to look around to confirm whether like Damascus goats are officially considered, like brachycephalic, like by veterinarians, and I didn't find any information about that officially. But brachycephaly is just like having a very short nose. And so the obvious example is brachycephaly about dogs, incidentally, like bulldogs. That and you know, they're, they're considered very, very unhealthy to have very short noses. You know, like, they evolved with long noses for a reason. And when you breed them to a really short noses, they're, I think they're soft palate, like goes back into the throat, and then they can't breathe, which is why you see pugs and bulldogs doing all these weird things. And breathing weird and sleeping weird. All this stuff. So, of course, I was thinking like, well, I wonder if they do have any health problems. And I wasn't able to figure whether or not they do.

Colin: I hadn't considered it, but now I couldn't help but wonder. Are these goats brachycephalic? Do their smushed faces make it difficult to eat and breathe? Does it mean they're unhealthy?

Kairo: That's a really interesting question, because you hear a lot about brachycephalic in the same sentence as health conditions or health issues. That's just one of those very common things online. Whereas like, well, somebody will mention the word brachycephaly and then like in the same sentence, they'll mention health issues, and then there's like a 30% chance that they're going to mention pugs.

Colin: This is Helen Kairo.

Kairo: Hi, it's really nice to meet you. My name is Helen Kairo, I'd like to be known as Kairo. I am a researcher, author and scientific communicator in the area of animal anatomy and morphology.

I spend a lot of time looking at weird breeds on the internet. And this includes breeds of everything, this includes like dogs, pugs and any other very flat-faced dogs. Common breeds like dogs and cats but also things like pigeons and snakes and other types of animals. So I have I guess just a general familiarity and interest in weird breeds and also why they look the way that they do and what they're bred for and what they do for us. And sort of the thought process behind breeding for things like this.

Colin: Kairo, who's also a biologist, says that being brachycephalic isn't necessarily a negative in this situation. That what looks strange to us, might actually help the goats thrive in their environment, and means they can help families even more. **Kairo:** So I want to dispel the notion that brachycephaly is automatically related to health issues, because it's not because there's pathological brachiocephalic. And there's just general shortening of the face, like you see in humans, versus their ancestors. So that's one. So the second thing is that what constitutes a health issue, sort of is context dependent for the for the animal. And I want to stress this idea of context yet again, because it's, it's actually very important when you talk about animals. So when so a person with that raising one of these flatface goats in there has a breathing difficulty if it's a person who is raising this animal ornamentally they have a cute little goat farm and they take the goats to like farm fairs and stuff like that, that might be an issue for them. But for a person who's raising these goats to produce like four pounds of milk a day and you know, they

really need the animal to, to produce to be a producer to as livestock that might not be considered much of a health issue.

Colin: Do you know why Damascus goats are bred this way to kind of look the way that they do? Because even the less extreme versions of Damascus goats have these really prominent sort of facial structures. Can you speak into that at all?

Kairo: I think that's a really interesting question because um, the noses are very weird, but actually like, a lot of Middle Eastern goats have that. Why? Because the additional tissue in the nose allows the air to be moistened before it reaches the lung. So, this gives them a better sense of smell. And it also just protects the nasal cavity. This is in fact, this is actually something that you see in a lot of desert animals. You smell best, when there is a level of humidity to that. This is why just before rain, or just after rain, everything smells really fresh. It's not because it really does, it's because it's because nasal receptors work best with a certain moisture level. So, and you see this in camels too where they have that schnoz, right? And at the same time, there's a function where it prevents a lot of water loss through the nose. And that's actually that's really important for animals living in very dry conditions. So that's actually, so do they have weird noses? Sure, maybe. But that's also a pattern of desert animals. Like, when you see when you, when you see the them in isolation outside of their environment. Oh, that's really weird. But when you see them in context, it makes perfect sense.

The other thing that makes perfect sense is the ears. So when you when you see these sorts of Middle Eastern breeds, one thing that you'll notice is that they have these large drooping ears. And it's, it's even even more so when they're babies. So, when the goats are born, they have large ears that they then grow into, right. And the adults have shorter ears compared to the babies proportionally, but they still have extremely long ears. And the reason for this being is that they have the ears actually have a lot of veins in them, and blood vessels. And what happens is that blood from inside the body gets pumped through the body to the ears, it goes, it goes into the ears, and then heat is lost, because the ear tissue is very thin. So it acts like a radiator to keep the animals cool. You see this in a lot of animals from desert or hot conditions. You see this in elephants, you see this in jack rabbits, where they just have very large ears for for temperature regulation. These are all adaptations to the environment and sort of it gives them the ability to sort of not only survive in the in this incredibly harsh, chaotic environment with poor quality food and limited resources. But it gives them the ability to do really, really well over there.

Colin: So that's super interesting. I would have never have thought of it that way. I'm curious though, do Damascus goats have other advantages over other goat breeds in the Middle East?

Kairo: In the Middle East, you see this, like incredible diversity of different breeds of goats that do different things. And they exist because they were bred to cover people's needs, that would have normally been covered with a range of livestock species. The primary purpose of the massive scope is meat production, but primarily milk production, they are really, really good milkers. The males get to be about 70 ish, 70 to 90 kilograms, the females are 50 to 60 kilograms. They they're really good because they have a really high rate of reproduction, and that they can give birth to twins in a lot of litters. So most goat species will just give birth to one, but many of the Middle Eastern breeds there, they're selected to give birth to twins or triplets, so that there's a higher yield. They have a very long milking period, in that, like, after giving birth, they can produce milk for about 200 ish days. So they can actually give birth and then put produce milk for the rest of the year, almost the rest of the year.

Colin: Yeah, this is a really good reminder to me that just because something seems strange to us here doesn't mean it's strange in its own context, right?

Kairo: Yeah, exactly like, when, when you see things that are weird, especially animal breeds that are weird, it's usually because they're taken out of context. A lot of times these animals, especially livestock and working animals, they're bred for a specific purpose. So in the context where they serve that purpose. And they thrive well in their the environment that they were built for. It makes perfect sense. But when you take them out, and place them in a different environment, people are like, "Oh, this is this is very strange," and so forth. And like, I think that's that's a lot of a lot of different types of a lot of different breeds are like that, like the weirdest breeds that you can think of. It makes sense within within their context.

Colin: Okay, so last question. Earlier you mentioned the baby Damascus goats. And this is something else that really stumped me. When I googled them I noticed that the baby goats looks really different from the adult ones. What do you think is going on there?

Kairo: The babies are mostly born normal looking. They have large ears, but their faces are mostly born normal. The ones that are born with flat faces, they have a diff, but they have difficulty nursing, so they typically don't make it now they're less considered less desirable. So babies have smaller bodies. So they don't overheat as quickly as something that is like 150 pounds or 200 pounds, where if you have a little baby and it's, you know, 10, 20 pounds, there's, it doesn't have the same sort of need for to dump heat constantly. So, so yeah, so there's that too.

Colin: That's great. Thank you for being willing to do this with us, we really appreciate it.

Kairo: Yeah yeah, it was fun and best of luck on the next step of your investigation.

Colin: The next step was to talk to someone from the Middle East who is familiar with the goats.

Dr. Sami: I am Sami Awabdeh. I am working on National Agricultural Research Center. I am leading the livestock research directorate. I am from Jordan.

Colin: Dr. Awabdeh did share some of the disadvantages of the Damascus goat, in particular there can be issues when the goats are having two or three babies at a time, and they can be sensitive to things like altitude and temperature. But he also confirmed a lot of the same things Kairo had said about the advantages.

Dr. Sami: Yes Colin. The farmers that are raising this type of animals they are happy with milk production are happy with the kids. The advantages of this breed is a huge. They are able to produce a lot of milk. And some records fitting with this breed [show] they are milking around from three to five, maybe more than five litres per head per day and also producing good amount of kids. They are breeding animals with nice morphology, with nice color, with nice height, with nice some specific face morphology.

And also, you will enjoy the nice picture of this animal, the kids is very nice. They are active, they are growing they are friendly with humans, you know you can make nice friendship with the kids with the mothers they are friendly you know.

Anyway, it is nice breed breed with nice milk production, with nice twinning grades. If you will manage your farm very well, I think you will succeed. You will, yaa'ni, you will receive very nice results.

Colin: The final step in this journey was to go straight to the source.

The donor relations team flew from Canada to Lebanon to see the good work MCC's partner *Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training* (or LOST) was doing.

After several long plane rides, we arrived in the capital of Lebanon, Beirut. The next day, the drive out to the LOST facility was gorgeous. We traveled over large rolling hills of golden/yellow grass and stubby trees. The LOST facility was situated at the base of this wide valley.

And the facility itself was impressive with well-designed infrastructure, including a restaurant/lounge, children's playground, a grocery market and administrative buildings for staff.

Surrounding the complex was this hedge of juniper trees that acted as a natural barrier around the perimeter.

There were huge greenhouses growing vegetables with complex irrigation networks.

And the goat pen itself was near the back end of the facility and the goats were outside their barn, eating food and climbing over the rocks in their pen.

Ahmed Audi: "Now we see the barn which is the location for the goats. And the MCC project."

Collin: Alright, very exciting. Wow, I travelled all over the world for this.

Colin: When we walked towards them, the goats trotted over to greet us.

Colin: "And the goats are running, wow."

Goats: Baahhh

Colin: It was very windy that day, as you'll hear soon in the recording.

And after months of talking about them, here they were, the Damascus goats themselves.

It was time to make amends.

Colin: "Hey, do you want to say that again?"

Brad: Here's the winner right here, Colin.

Colin: Yes, this one might be the crowning jewel. Hello my name is Colin Friesen with Mennonite Central Committee, what's your name? Well, I think I owe you an apology because all this time I was so wrapped up looking at your face and being like, oh my goodness what is this? When in reality, you're just doing a great job helping people provide milk and meat.

Goats: Baa-ing

Colin: Yeah yeah yeah. You've been so helpful to so many families in Lebanon and elsewhere. I just wanted to thank you for all the work you've been able to do for these families. And I was just wondering, do you get upset when people judge you before they get to know you?

Goats: Baa-ing

Colin: Can anyone translate goat? No? Alright.

Colin: (laughs) So those were the Damascus goats. The rockstars themselves.

In all seriousness though...

This journey has ultimately been a good reminder that MCC partners know best.

The goats may look strange to us, but they are this way for good reason.

Through our partner LOST, MCC distributes goats to 80 vulnerable Lebanese families. They train women on milk production, food processing and marketing of the goat milk. The training is also available to 50 refugee women.

When I was in Lebanon the donor relations team had a chance to meet with some of the families who had received goats through the project and they said that receiving the goats made a big difference for them and helped them provide for their families.

The project is especially neat because it has a peacebuilding component.

Lebanon has received a large number of refugees which has been a strain on their already struggling economy. The income from the goats helps to relieve the economic stress.

Providing livelihoods is important to reduce tensions between Lebanese people and the newcomers as they both try and provide for their families.

Our partners know the local landscapes and what the needs are. They hold creative solutions to the issues their communities face, even when those solutions might look unusual on the surface. And that's why we support them.

Meghan: *That was Colin Friesen, donor engagement assistant for MCC Canada, helping unravel the mystery of the Damascus goats.*

Thank you to our guests Kairo, Dr. Awabdeh, Kristin Hugo and partner staff Ahmed Audi and Bassel Debs for hosting MCC donor relations staff and touring them around the farm.

Did you know you can give your friends or family a goat for Christmas? Goats are one of the projects in MCC's Christmas Giving Guide. Check out the goats and other great gifts at mcc.org/Christmas.

(GOAT NOISE OF INDIGNANCE)

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thanks for listening and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Show notes:

Check out [MCC's Christmas Giving Guide](#).

And consider [buying a goat](#) for your loved one.

Read more about [how animals make a difference](#) in people's lives.

Check out Kristin Hugo's work [here](#).

And Kairo's Instagram [here](#).