

The natural weaning window in suckler beef cattle

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Background

- 2000 Cattle, grazing
- 4000ha SSSI
- Six breeding Herds in their Home Ranges
- outwintered
- Organic
- PFLA
- All Cattle run together in each Herd
- Cull Females are removed before bulling
- 18month old Steers are removed in Autumn
- Breeding Females remain in their maternal Herd for life
- Herds have a Social Structure made up of Family Groups

Introduction

- 2003/4/5 health problems in separated and housed young stock
- Subsequent change of husbandry system without separation of young stock from their mothers
- Cows appeared to dry off in the presence of their calf
- Reinhardt (1981) describes natural weaning in Zebus, Green (1983) in Bison
- Do Cows wean their calves and if so, when?

Methods

- Weaning behaviour is too rare for direct observations to provide statistically valid data, so instead
- Every Herd was visited once a week with each cow's udder scored for "suckled", "un-suckled" and inconclusive.
- Time of transition from "suckled" to "dry" was determined for each cow as her weaning date.
- In combination with the birth dates of her calves the time spent in lactation between calvings was established in days and in percent of the calving interval.
- Linear regression was used to investigate the relationship between the available time and the length of lactation

Results

- Out of 133 calves 96% (128) were weaned by their mothers, five were not
- Weaning averaged at 294 days (just under 10 months) in these cows with an average Calving Interval of 363 days: Cows spent 82,5% of time between births in lactation, feeding the calf at foot.
- Linear regression showed that cows with a longer CI (more time at their disposal) weaned older calves while reducing the time in which they were lactating and pregnant ($R^2=0.171$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$).

Conclusions

- **Suckler Beef Cows in this Herd are mostly weaning their calves without the need for physical separation**
- **The time of weaning appears to relate to the time available between parturitions, rather than calf age.**

