

Morocco's miracle mule 'confirmed'

DNA tests have confirmed that a Moroccan mule did give birth to a foal.

Veterinary experts say the foal's father was a donkey and its mother a true mule.

" The foal inherited a mixture of horse and donkey chromosomes via the mother's ovum "

Gigi Kay, Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad

The discovery defies scientific wisdom because mules are supposed to be sterile.

Mules are hybrids - a cross between two species - in this case, the horse and the donkey.

They are almost always unable to breed because their genetic make-up is so unusual.

The 14-year-old mother mule gave birth at the end of August, in a small hamlet in the region of Oulmes, 80 kilometres south of the ancient city of Fez.

Odd looks

Vets from the Society for the Protection of Animals of Abroad (Spana) visited the animal and took blood tests for analysis.

"Those tests confirmed that the mother is a mule with each of her blood groups made up of both horse and donkey alleles, or genetic material - in other words she is a true equine/asinine hybrid," veterinary director Gigi Kay told BBC News Online.

"The blood results from the foal indicate that the father was a donkey.

"It shows that the foal inherited a mixture of horse and donkey chromosomes via the mother's ovum."

The Moroccan foal looks a bit like a baby donkey and a bit like a baby mule - but not exactly like either.

Genetically, it is about a quarter horse and three quarters donkey.

Would be 'astounding'

Despite the results of the blood tests, some experts are still unconvinced.

John Pycock, a specialist in equine reproduction at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, said such a birth would be "astounding".

"I'm very sceptical of a mule giving birth after being covered," he said.

But he added that it had been shown that mules could give birth to embryos transplanted into the womb artificially.

A horse has 64 chromosomes and a donkey has 62, so a mule is left with 63, an uneven number which cannot divide into chromosome pairs. This should make a mule unable to reproduce.