

DONKEYS *for* AFRICA

Promoting communication about donkey welfare in Africa

www.donkeysforafrica.org

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Image: Hugh Ardoin - <https://hughes-photo.com>

An Eco-friendly solution

DONKEYS AS WORKING ANIMALS CONTRIBUTE TO A HEALTHIER EARTH

Global warming, climate change: call it what you may.

The terms global warming and climate change are often used interchangeably. Climate change is any change in the state of climate which lasts for decades or longer, including warming or cooling, whilst global warming more specifically relates to worldwide surface temperature increases.

The likelihood and impact of extreme weather events are currently considered amongst the most important global risks.

World Economic Forum, Global Risks Report 2018.

include more frequent extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, heavy rainfall with floods, heavy snowfall, and extinctions of species due to shifting temperature patterns. Effects significant to humans include the threat to food security from decreasing crop yields caused by a combination of natural factors.

Donkeys originated in the semi-desert areas of Northern and Eastern Africa and are well able to survive on vegetation that would not sustain many other species, particularly domesticated animals.

They are often the last living creatures to be seen on denuded land and then wrongly get blamed for the destruction of the vegetation. If we compare per weight of the animal, donkeys can survive on significantly less forage than cattle, and also need less water. This has implications for the choice of working animals in subsistence agriculture.

However, to work effectively donkeys must be in good condition, and not just survive. Current climate conditions challenge the well-being of working animals as well as traditional agricultural systems.

Intelligent approaches

Conservation agriculture (CA) focuses on long-term crop and livestock production while having minimal effects on the environment. It tries to find a balance between the need for food production and the preservation of the ecological system.

The primary CA practices include minimal tillage of the soil, rotating crops and planting cover crops. The disadvantages of mechanisation here are clear: engines such as tractors compact the soil, consume expensive fuel, repair and maintenance can be costly and unavailable, and they are heavy to move around, often needing road systems.

Donkeys have a range of attributes which make them the most suitable animal for African farmers facing global changes.

Peta Jones of Donkey Power summarises: "The transport animal that has been with us for six millennia now has other advantages. They produce fertilizer in the form of manure, act as guards for smaller stock, are durable, low maintenance and long-living, suffer from remarkably few diseases, the

equipment needed is technically simple, and donkeys are acceptable to and easily worked by women in the communities. They surely are the animal of choice for the future. Four legs can be more effective than four wheels!"

Donkeys are essential in subsistence agricultural areas as working animals.

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Climate change challenges donkeys

Climate change brings greater demands on increasingly limited resources, leading to changing patterns of work. Worldwide millions of people rely on donkeys for their own survival, and it is more important than ever to protect their welfare.

Working donkeys are affected

Dr Philip Mshelia comments on the effect of global warming on donkeys in North-Eastern Nigeria and part of Niger Republic:

“Any way you look at it, donkeys seem to be at the receiving end of the effect of climate. Access to water and feed is reduced due to drought. Droughts have plunged families into hunger, with few farm by-products to feed their animals. The donkeys struggle to survive on low rations and at the same time, their owners have to travel further and further with them to access wells that are thousands of feet deep. As drought-stricken areas increase, migration for pasture and water puts donkeys at risk. The movement in search of water and grazing happens as conditions dictate, without the earlier patterns that created sustainability. Donkeys are pivotal in those migrations with little water or feed and seldom enough rest.

The greater the effect of climate change, the more reliance there is on donkey power without a reciprocal improvement in the animals’ welfare.”

Dr Ben Fru Wara of FAWCAM in Cameroon points out that the commercial value of donkeys is weather-dependent. During the rainy season, especially between March and June, local demand for donkeys is high as they are needed for ploughing on farms. During such periods the price of a donkey almost doubles.

Theft is also more common at this time.

Solutions

Traditional agricultural practices can be adapted to address the effects of climate change. Conservation agriculture (CA) is becoming increasingly common.

The Kenya Network for Dissemination of Agricultural Technologies (KENDAT) has been teaching CA practices for the last 20 years. Their Heshimu Punda (Respect the Donkey) Programme works with donkeys in counties where over ninety percent of the donkeys are involved in transport and tillage. Donkey welfare is part of the education process.

The donkey’s role has changed from pulling ploughs to transporting mulching material, seeds, harvested crops and water. See <http://www.kendat.org/>

Donkeys to the rescue

Alex Mayers of The Donkey Sanctuary says that “Donkeys bring resilience in fragile climates, as they can transport food and water to other animals in need. There was an interesting case last year where the drought in the horn of Africa meant that Ethiopian donkeys were used to bring fodder from distribution centres to government livestock holding areas.”

THE MULTI-TASKING ANIMAL

Credit: Invisible donkeys in ancient Mesopotamia: New insights from modern studies in Sub-Saharan Africa – Dr. Jill Goulder.

Few families in subsistence conditions can afford the luxury of an animal that does not deliver service year-round. Donkeys meet on-going demands remarkably successfully. Donkeys can carry considerably more per bodyweight than cattle and negotiate narrow, uneven paths. Speedy transport of crops from the field to storage, processing or market has a marked positive economic effect as it hugely reduces harvest loss from decay, pests and theft. Construction materials can be conveyed further and in much greater quantities, enabling sourcing further afield.

A common modern feature of working-animal use is the hiring and lending of donkeys, and arrangements such as communal ownership of donkeys.

Pack-donkey caravans

Long-distance pack-donkey caravans enable profitable activities, both legal and illegal. Laden donkeys can negotiate rocky, precipitous paths and take difficult back-routes. Their excellent memory for routes, good night vision, and ability to work unsupervised results in them being sent unaccompanied across national borders laden with smuggled goods, through desert, mountains or dense vegetation where capture is unlikely.

All in all, donkeys are versatile, uncomplaining workers, assisting in a multitude of tasks.



Donkeys and Humane Education

Humane Education (HE) nurtures compassion and respect for all living beings.

Humane education focuses on values, social justice, citizenship, environmental issues and the welfare of animals. It encourages empathy, compassion and respect for people, animals and the environment and recognises the connections between these. Animal welfare education is one element of humane education.

Reaching children

There are many successful humane education (HE) programmes for children. Children are extremely receptive, their minds are inquiring and active and they have huge supplies of natural enthusiasm. HE can take place in formal settings such as school classrooms, at clubs such as Animal Care clubs, and in formal and informal supervised contact sessions with animals. Showing children similarities between their own feelings and body language and that of animals creates understanding and compassion. Simple methods include story-telling where the children participate in choosing appropriate gentle, loving and kind actions, playing with soft animal toys, and puppet shows with the animals speaking and sharing their feelings, fears and joy. Puppets need not be fancy: a simple glove with a donkey head and ears is easy to make.

Reaching adults

Information on good welfare practices can be combined with HE. Raising awareness of appropriate behaviours is the starting point. The power of example is important: if a few owners practise good welfare, their animals will be evidence of the advantages. Introducing a competitive element may work. It is important to identify respected leaders in a community, to enlist their support, train them in humane methods and mentor them. This can ensure continued good welfare and better attitudes in the community. There is no instant solution and it is a long, slow process that requires commitment from all concerned.

Successes

FAWCAM: We are proud to say that we are successful in our mission in Bui Division of Cameroon with strong emphasis on

There is a well-documented link between childhood cruelty to animals and later criminality, violence and anti-social behaviour.

the humane treatment of donkeys and respect for natural habitats.

In one of our public talks, someone stood up and confessed that he is very sorry about the way he has been treating his donkey. He didn't know that a donkey is a sentient being. Many donkey owners now appreciate us: "If FAWCAM could continue in this spirit, almost everybody in Bui Division will like to own a donkey".

Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust: Little by little attitudes are changing and the children who learned to enjoy and respect their animals have grown up to be animal lovers themselves and are now teaching the next generation.

amaTrac Uluntu: "One of our Donkey Champions used to treat his donkeys as other owners do, chasing them and whipping them from the field to his house. The donkeys were terrified and kicked. The village people observe this behaviour and don't link it to a feeling. After being involved with the HE programme, he now takes treats to them, calls them by their names and approaches them slowly. The donkeys accompany him calmly, one tucked under each arm or walking quietly behind him. The village people quickly changed their views that donkeys kick and bite for no reason.

In some villages, people threw boiling water on donkeys that went into their yards to drink the very limited water available. This has now stopped. Areas have been allocated with water for donkeys to drink. If the donkeys enter their yards they call the Village Champion to remove them. This has taken almost a year to achieve, but it's achievable!"

When conducting such training respect for donkey owners is essential. Trust is built by focussing on positive aspects, recognising challenges, and asking for the reasons current practices are used. Make sure that the more humane ways of treating donkeys are realistic, achievable, understood and sustainable. They should also demonstrate the positive economic impact resulting from a healthy and productive working donkey.

Examples of HE programmes:

- <http://www.hsi.org/search-results.html?q=Humane+Education>
- http://www.hsi.org/about/how_we_work/local_empowerment/training/equine-welfare.html
- <https://spana.org/about-us/professionals/education-professionals/>



Image: SPANA

The Skins trade – where are we now?

Some African countries have successfully imposed legislation banning the export of donkey skins. Abattoirs have been closed, sometimes only to re-open a while later. The potential profits in the trade often outweigh any welfare or practical considerations.

In **South Africa** the trade has either been halted or successfully gone underground.

In **Nigeria** a bill to prohibit the killing and exportation of donkeys or their carcasses passed its second reading at the House of Representatives at the end of 2018. A penalty of 10 years imprisonment is recommended for offenders. The bill is now with the Committee on Agricultural Institutions and Services.

In **Ethiopia** substantial public opposition has resulted in the faltering of the skins export trade. However, on the same day as a seminar about this in Addis Ababa, shocking evidence of illegal cross-border trade in donkeys between Ethiopia and **Kenya** came to light. A reputable report revealed that “donkeys are being poached in Ethiopia before enduring a 250km journey through difficult terrain with no water and scarce feeding, to the Moyale cross-border cities.”

This places Kenya at the centre of East Africa’s donkey crisis.

Up to 3,000 donkeys are sold on the open livestock markets of Ethiopia each month. From the markets, the animals are trekked and driven in cattle trucks for distances ranging between 250km and 1,100km to reach the border post to Kenya. Furthermore, stolen donkeys are smuggled across borders with **Tanzania** and Ethiopia to feed Kenya’s expanding abattoirs. There are reports that some are being brought in from **Somalia** too.

Further action addressing the long-term impact of the skins trade is essential if the potential decimation of donkey populations in certain countries is to be prevented.

To bit or not to bit?

Bridles and bits are an unknown “luxury” for many owners of working equids. Are they necessary and good? Countless working donkeys get by happily without bridles and particularly bits, if they are familiar with their routes and handlers. Other aids can be used to communicate instructions, e.g. to start movement by rattling a plastic bottle with small stones in it, in place of slapping with reins or a whip. Voice communication is an effective option, relying on the relationship between animal and human. The use of bridles and bits is often a community-based tradition. A harsh or ill-fitting bit or even worse, a mouthpiece of wire or rope, can cause great and unnecessary suffering.



Working bitless.
Image: Brooke East Africa

A lighter moment...

Regularly visiting this Service Station to collect fuel, these donkeys refuse to vacate their spot until they get their complimentary apples.

Credit: SA People





Take part in the multichoice selection via our interactive newsletter version, or email us the answer.

Our FEBRUARY 2019 question is:
How often should donkeys eat?

Answer in our next issue.

From the editor

We live in challenging times and work under challenging conditions. Particularly in donkey welfare, so many factors act against improvement: climate conditions, owners battling to sustain their own well-being let alone that of their animals, poverty, social factors, perceived low status of donkeys and their owners – the list is endless. We need to be aware of and sensitive to human welfare and dignity whilst addressing animal welfare.

The recurring themes of One Health, One Welfare, global climate change and Humane Education all link together to present exciting opportunities. Donkeys seem to attract the most wonderful, compassionate and dedicated people like yourselves – we salute you all and wish you renewed vigour for the year ahead. You are not alone: we all stand together for a better future in Africa.

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