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# The Equitarian Initiative: International Humanitarian Aid Using Horses

(Winner of a 2011 SDSU Schultz-Werth Award)

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*“If I die, my family...well, they’ll survive. If my mule dies, we’ll all die.”*

This harrowing comment from a Mexican laborer echoes the worldwide importance of working horses, mules, and donkeys. For many in the United States, a horse is a source of recreation, a sport vehicle of sorts, a decoration, or a pet. For most other parts of the world, a working equid (horse, donkey, or mule) is a family’s sole vehicle, a day laborer, and the only



A donkey awaiting chores in Veracruz.

constant source of income available. Many of these communities lack a steady food source for the animals, much less a competent veterinarian; thus, the world’s veterinarians treat only about 10% of the world’s total equid population [1]. Such a staggering statistic is only part of the problem: working horses, donkeys, and mules not only lack direct care, but their owners often resort to harmful traditional medicines (or no treatment at all) when the animals need help. The vicious cycle then continues as

owners fall deeper into economic hardship when the health of their work animals does not improve. “Equitarian” work, defined as serving equids with compassion to improve their health and welfare, has a two-fold purpose: benefiting the animals, but in doing so changing the lives of their families for the better (thus the word’s derivation from “humanitarian”) [2]. Many initiatives already exist to change the state of four-legged laborers, proving that equitarian work is valuable, logical, and fills a deep need in the world.

Approximately 100 million working equids can be found in the developing world, in fields or farms, on roads and tracks, in factories, garbage dumps, tourist attractions, urban settings, or remotely rural areas [3]. This is approximately 95% of the world’s donkeys and 60% of all horses [3]. China includes the highest population of equids, at just below 20 million. Mexico has approximately 13 million, followed by Brazil and Ethiopia, with approximately eight million and six million, respectively. Pakistan and Argentina similarly have five million and four million equids, respectively [3]. It is also interesting to note that

working equids populously inhabit countries covering the full spectrum of the 2010 Human Development Index – from countries of high human development, such as Argentina and Mexico, to countries of low human development, such as Kenya, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia [4]. Donkey populations tend to be stable even in rapidly industrializing countries (like China or Brazil) because these countries most often experience the painful divide between the rich and the poor [3]. As the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, the more rural areas often experience incredible poverty, with little access to technology or education, meaning a continuing need for working horses.

Not only are working horse populations stabilizing, but uses for them in many countries are in fact growing. Increased fuel prices in countries such as Pakistan and India require more rural and urban residents alike to switch from motorized vehicles to the old-fashioned kind of horsepower [5]. Over the last 30 years, the donkey population has increased in sub-Saharan Africa, northern India, and Latin America's tropical highlands [3]. Mule populations have increased to as high as 15 million in 2008, as many owners are discovering their unique hardiness, static personalities, and easy maintenance [3]. For some very remote areas, equine transportation is the only way to get from point A to point B, as travel is too dangerous, expensive, or impossible with motorized vehicles; equine populations will remain in these countries as long as the roads need to be traveled.

As mentioned, working horses are used extensively for transportation in developing countries. Countries such as Honduras, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kenya battle rough terrain by choosing donkeys and carts versus larger, bulkier motorized vehicles. Donkeys, mules, and horses can also be found deep within urban areas, serving as garbage collectors in Cairo, Egypt, or Soweto, South Africa, working the brick kilns in India, laboring on coffee or livestock farms in Veracruz, Mexico, rural Ethiopia, or Lesotho, and taking children to school in Veracruz, Mexico or the Dominican Republic [3][6]. For instance, equine assistance can reduce a workweek by 25 hours in terms of fetching water alone [3]. Working equids literally help in international development—from carrying building materials in floodravaged Pakistan via a “donkey train” [7] to carrying ballots and supplies to the polls in Afghanistan's 2010 elections [8]. These animals have rightfully been dubbed the “Cinderellas” of international development [3].



Equids are an invaluable part of world transportation.



Donkeys carried the ballots in Afghanistan's 2010 elections (upi.com).

These “Cinderellas” are also extremely prevalent, but somehow devastatingly overlooked, in the worldwide tourism industry. Tourism would be impossible without the help of these gentle giants. “The animals themselves will never realise the significance of their work, but their owners do” [9]. For instance, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and India are hosts to a large population of equids used for tourism; many of them suffer from thirst, heat stress, lameness, hoof deterioration, overgrown hooves, lesions along their withers, spine, shoulders, base of the tail, and other areas of contact for the harness or tack, secondary injuries, lip and mouth wounds, and depressed behavior resulting from abuse, fear, exhaustion, or pain [9]. Excited tourists may not thoroughly inspect the animals prior to selecting a burro to ride or a horse to pull them in a cart;



Tourism in Petra, Jordan (thebrooke.org).

overweight tourists can be seen riding up steep mountainsides on incredibly small burros, families may overload a cart, hurried travelers and demands of the industry do not allow for sufficient rest time for the animals, and working equids face extreme climates in the world’s most tourist-laden areas, such as in Petra, Jordan or the Havasu Falls in Arizona [9][10].

“Domestic work animals...assist in eliminating poverty, reducing drudgery and creating wealth. Working animals can be sustainable, affordable and appropriate, requiring little external input especially amongst resource-poor people in developing countries,” according to Dr. Caleb A. Kudi of the Department of Agriculture and Food Studies at the University of Plymouth [3]. In more fortunate developing countries, every family has at least one donkey, mule, or horse. If a family is considered on average to be 6 people, 100 million working equids ultimately affect the lives of about 600 million people [3]. In most agriculturally-based societies, a donkey, or an even more prestigious horse, is a status symbol, a sign of wealth and prosperity for the family. Women



Children are often the sole caretakers of animals.

also rely on and appreciate their working counterparts: “For us women a donkey should be our first friend, for it takes away the loads that used to crush our backs,” says Mary Waceke, a housewife in Lari, Kenya [3]. Women welcome equines’ help with time-consuming household chores and farming tasks, and they also serve as a companion while the men are outside of the home for many hours a day. Children also utilize donkeys in as many ways as adults. Donkeys help get them to school or do the dirty work when kids are forced to work outside the home for supplemental income, such as in the markets or rubble dumps in big cities.

Children in poor areas are often the sole caretakers of animals, so they often develop deeper bonds with their burros or horses in ways people in more privileged areas may not understand. Working equids affect more than just companies or tourist agents — “For the whole world it might be only a donkey, mule or horse, but for the poor owner it is the whole world” [3].

Horses, donkeys, and mules are lauded and appreciated in many developing countries, but they can also be severely overworked, underfed, or overlooked. Neglect is often a matter of a lack of education, but sometimes it results from shortcuts taken out of economic or emotional desperation. Approximately 80% of ailments treated by The Brooke are a result of owners’ poverty or a lack of knowledge about how best to care for animals [11]. The most common areas of concern that equitarian veterinarians have faced include malnutrition and



Malnourished and extremely emaciated animals are heartbreaking to see.

parasite burdens, dental problems (orthodontic disease, malocclusions, discomfort), skin wounds, especially from improper harness, saddle, or bridle fit, musculoskeletal problems and lameness, hoof and shoe irregularities (correcting foot balance, severe growth, or improperly fitted, homemade shoes), surgery and field anesthesia needs (castrations, removing tumors, and other treatments), and internal medicine (pregnancy checks, internal diseases, other deep-seated problems) [1].

Direct care and education are the two emphasized modes of welfare improvement among many working equine welfare organizations. Primarily, animals must first be treated using the best means available, under direct care. Most often, animals presented are in need of basic deworming, assessment and changes to the tack fit, and dental and farrier work. A somewhat debatable subject is the use of modern veterinary equipment and technology. How many “toys,” gadgets, machines, and tools should we use in the field? Some may prefer to use the best technology to better “show” the owner the problems inside his horse, such as expensive radiographs, ultrasounds or Fecal Egg Counts (FEC). Other advocates say that a key to maintaining the sustainability of such ventures lies in only providing the services that could later be adopted by local veterinarians or the owners themselves. Some crafty techniques that are already being utilized by veterinarians in the field include using a modified battery-powered drill handle outfitted with a clamp on the end for easy and clean castrations; attention to easily-obtained drugs in the host country for anesthesia (depending on the availability of

Direct care and education are the two emphasized modes of welfare improvement among many working

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A severe saddle wound.



Radiographs: should we use first-world technology?

ketamine, xilazine, etc.); using locally-sourced foam for tweaking saddle fit; handmaking cinches, nylon headstalls, and other pieces of tack; attaching ropes and pulleys to soccer field goalposts to sustain the head during dental examinations; applying disinfectant made of orange seed to foot infections; carefully using available farm tools, such as an easily accessible blade, to trim hooves; and using nearby trees to raise I.V. fluid drips [1].

Perhaps just as vital as direct care is the educational aspect of equitarian work. Since veterinarians often have a one-time treatment opportunity with each given case (the horse, donkey, or mule is brought to a one-day clinic, to go home after treatment), generating a change in the animal’s welfare is difficult without a change in the owner’s practices. Sometimes owners are simply not aware of the harm they are causing their animals. In other circumstances, outright neglect and ignorance is at fault, just as in many places in the United States. And in still other cases, traditional remedies may have been used with the hope of treating the animal without veterinary intervention, thus creating additional issues for the animal. As Dr. Tom Juergens of the Fast Horse Project in Mongolia puts it, “They don’t (practice traditional medicine) because they don’t care about their horses – they do it because they care about their horses and they don’t have any alternatives” [12]. Our job is not to blame the well-meaning efforts of centuries-old healing techniques or homemade remedies, rather to emphasize the negative effects some of these practices may have on equines in order to foster positive change. In Mexico, euthanasia is virtually a foreign concept, even to some veterinarians: why use limited financial resources to put the animal down when it can easily remain in its pasture until natural death [1]? Also, some farm laborers believe it is detrimental to give horses water during the working day, a potentially fatal mistake. Some populations in areas such as Egypt or Multan, Pakistan will actually slit their donkeys’ nostrils in the hope that this will help them to breathe better [3]. To alleviate infection, incisions are sometimes made in a new wound, a rag or piece of cloth is inserted, then the incision is closed with thread. The abscess drains as

Perhaps just as vital as direct care is the



Tools for castration.



Traditional remedy of sewing cloth into a wound (thebrooke.org).

pus; however, some mistakenly claim this to be the “infection” leaving the wound [3]. These are just some examples of attempts owners may make to increase daily productivity; it is up to us to share the knowledge we have about better practices!

Some groups are doing just this. The first-ever Equitarian workshop was held during October 2010 to discuss and apply proper equitarian veterinary care abroad. This workshop marked an unprecedented collaboration between several equine welfare groups, which are discussed below.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) serves as the umbrella organization of the relatively new equitarian initiative. Equitarian work was a special topic at the 2009 AAEP National Convention, from which a workshop was forged between several groups. Many veterinarians have small projects occurring in various regions of the world, and the goal of the AAEP Equitarian initiative is to increase dialogue and join forces among many of the different existing projects and organizations. The 2010 Equitarian workshop in Mexico joined together the AAEP, the Donkey Sanctuary, World Horse Welfare, the



The 2010 Equitarian Workshop in Veracruz, Mexico.

Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA), the Asociación Mexicana de Médicos Veterinarios Especialistas en Equinos (AMMVEE), and the Asociación Mexicana de Médicos Veterinarios Dentistas de Equinos (AMMVDE). The Donkey Sanctuary is a charity founded in England with international burro outreach in many countries, including Mexico. World Horse Welfare is similarly devoted to international improvement of the welfare of horses, with notable efforts in

veterinary care abroad and campaigning, educating, and training owners and professionals in countries of interest. Although the best efforts seem to be those initiated by single teams of veterinarians in high-need areas, collaborations among influential forces such as this are key to making a global impact and realizing our shared, common goals [1].

Although this charity was not a participant of the 2010 Equitarian workshop, a notable source of information and experience is the Brooke. Perhaps the world’s expert on the state of working equids, this organization based out of the United Kingdom has an ambitious dedication to reaching 2 million working animals by the year 2016 [5]. Their mission is to provide direct care and training to prevent the unnecessary



Veracruz has the highest number of Mexico’s working equids. These burros deliver milk!

suffering of animals, but they also perform research and promote the spread of this information to all parts of the world. It is only appropriate, then, that The Brooke sponsored the Sixth International Colloquium on Working Equids in Delhi, India last year, which facilitated dialogue and planned for outreach to many more worldwide equid populations [13].

Especially prevalent in last year's program was a focus on not only veterinarians, but also a conglomeration of experts from many

different disciplines, including international development, social science, human health, and education, to better assess the economic, sociocultural, psychological, and practical effects of alleviating human and animal suffering through veterinary work [13].

Other non-veterinarians can also find a place in equitarian work – especially veterinary students and veterinary technician students. The R-VETS organization (formerly the HSVMA's Rural Area Veterinary Services, or RAVS) and the Christian Veterinary Mission (CVM) offer opportunities for veterinarians and students alike to spread their services in high-need areas stretching across the U.S. and the globe [14][15]. Short- and long-term trips are available, from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota to Bolivia and Mongolia [15]. Both of these groups are well-advertised in veterinary colleges throughout the country.

Not only veterinary students can participate in equitarian work, as non-veterinarians also play vital roles in spreading equitarian knowledge and resources. From helping with on-site educational activities at equitarian field locations, to providing language translating services, to offering assistance with holding or restraining horses, non-veterinary professionals can help equitarian workshops develop into cross-disciplinary initiatives. The author, as an undergraduate student that attended the 2010 EQUITARIAN Workshop, has initiated several research projects to bring the benefits of equitarian work to horse populations within the state of South Dakota. As the R-VETS Program already performs veterinary outreach projects on South Dakota reservations such as the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation, the "2011 South Dakota EQUITARIAN Survey" was initiated to more exactly identify the care and health of some of these tribal horse populations, with sensitivity and cultural awareness. As part of this survey, a parallel paper survey was sent to South Dakota equine veterinarians. The veterinarian survey poses questions to South Dakota veterinarians about the resources or services they may be willing to provide for in-need tribal horse populations. The results of the 2011 South Dakota EQUITARIAN Survey have the potential to ignite a high-powered grassroots movement that unites tribal horse owners with state-wide veterinary resources to promote the more equal distribution of animal health services. The presence of the equitarian initiative in South Dakota will only continue to solidify after completion of this survey, with a comparison of the diverse uses of reservation equines, identification of the most at-need horse populations within the state, and the facilitation of direct care for these animals with the help of veterinarians within the state. EQUITARIAN work is an international project, but its implications within our own country are perhaps just as vital.



The Brooke hosted the Sixth International Colloquium on Working Equids (thebrooke.org).





Educating children can make an incredible difference in animal welfare.

workers and educators. Knowing the language, culture, and practices of the owners makes for fluid communication and sustainable contact. Other techniques to involve many aspects of communities include giving presentations, activities, or even coloring books to area children, since they are often the primary animal caretakers. Some organizations utilize community leaders, such as The Brooke's community animal health workers, who work within their home population to disseminate the information from outside agencies to their peers, automatically making the information more credible and applicable. Striving for sustainability, autonomy, and self-responsibility among animal caretakers at the workshops will be a continuing but worthwhile struggle in the future. Besides questions of technology, medicine, and material availability, the question also arises of whether to charge for equitarian services. On the one hand, this practice would just "feel" awkward, as well as adding an administrative burden and the fear of turning away needy cases [16]. Conversely, this practice may encourage the notion that animals have value and promote sustainability by preparing small populations to someday be receptive to supporting a local, paid veterinarian. Overall, equitarians embody the creed "To Do No Harm" by faithfully treating whatever case arises; however, sustainable practices should logically be considered to empower an improved future.

Equitarian work is fueled by individuals who love animals and understand the irreplaceable role of working equids in family life, international development, economics, and tourism, in both urban and rural settings. However, this is not just a humanitarian initiative. Equitarian work fulfills our responsibility to safeguard the welfare of working animals and to spread the knowledge that only a portion of the world has access to, working

Given the added—we might even say life-giving—importance working equids have for humanity, we cannot expect to improve animal welfare if it does not improve human welfare. Logically, no amount of volunteer work or education will change a society's practices if the new ideas do not benefit the lives of the struggling humans. Many challenges still exist despite the impressive existing efforts. As mentioned earlier, the interdisciplinary nature of equitarian work warrants teamwork between many professional fields, especially social



Utilizing local resources, especially locals and community leaders, is key.

from the ground up to positively influence the lives of our own species. Challenges exist, especially in striving to develop the most sustainable projects possible, merging the world's most effective and influential charity and action groups, cross-utilizing other disciplines to understand the global implications, and perhaps most demanding, offering suggestions to adjust the worldviews of those whose practices may limit their own productivity and the welfare of their equids.

With increased industrialization and globalization, the world seems to be growing closer, though the rift between the wealthy and poor is increasing almost uncontrollably. We can rely on a common thread between countries, however, which is the “Cinderellas” of society, beloved beasts of burden. They have much to tell us about our own human race. This is an idea echoed around the globe, from the old English saying, “Show me your horse and I will tell you who you are” to the Kenyan Vice-President’s warning: “We as a nation cannot claim to respect human rights if we can’t show respect to our animals” [3]. Who we are rests upon how we act toward those that have no say. For some horses, donkeys, and mules around the world, equitarian work may be their only voice.

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