



Work World wide Articles



Donkeys and their importance to people 01/04/2004

An Article by Keith Powell in Ethiopia

This article is unashamedly about donkeys and their importance to people in the world today. Whenever I tell colleagues or lay people in the west that I'm a donkey vet I often see a glimpse of amusement in their eyes or sometimes a quickly suppressed expression of pity plays across their faces. Unfortunately in the eyes of most people, this is not the most fashionable or indeed glamorous species to be involved with. Yet closer inspection reveals an animal upon which millions of people depend. In

India, China or Mexico, the Sudan or Ethiopia to name a few countries, donkey power is more important to the majority of people than the internal combustion engine.

Ethiopia, where I work, is a country infamous for its famines and its wars; as a consequence of these problems it is necessary for all animals to be utilitarian. Yet Ethiopian peasant farmers consider it worthwhile to keep five and a half million donkeys. (That's enough to stretch nose to tail from the equator to the pole.) Why is this? They are, after all, a non-food producing species. If you ask Ethiopian farmers why, they inevitably shrug and reply, "Without a donkey, my wife and I become the donkeys". The donkey is the "workhorse" that powers a subsistence agricultural industry, the only transport system available, the only beast of burden tough enough to survive such a workload in this harsh environment. The humble donkey has now been recognised as a route to delivering practical, effective and sustainable socio-economic assistance.

Various facts and figures can give an idea of how reliant these people are on their donkeys. Of the 60 million Ethiopians, 85% are subsistence farmers and three quarters of these live more than a six hour walk from the nearest road. Any income these people earn is derived from selling the surplus they produce. This money is used to buy the essentials the farmers cannot produce themselves, such as salt or tools. The donkey is their sole means of transporting this surplus to market, as alternatives are unaffordable and totally impractical given the spectacularly rough terrain. It would be next to impossible for humans to carry sacks of grain for six or more hours in the mountainous highlands. It has been shown that donkey owners cultivate a greater area than non-donkey owners.

Donkeys are integral to both the planting and the harvesting of the crops, they plough and compact the earth and transport produce to and from the fields. A field can be literally a few



donkey is still needed to crop. In times of severe used to assist the better areas.



square metres, miles from the village in between rocks, on some mountainous terrace. All available land, however marginal, is cultivated thanks to the donkey. When crops fail, a healthy plant and harvest the next hardship the donkeys are household in migrating to

From one village in North Eastern Tigray the people go to the Sudan, where they then put the donkeys to work transporting goods, so providing the owner and the family with an income. Hauling goods in this environment is a job to which the donkey is admirably suited as it evolved in this region from the rather wonderfully named Somali Wild Ass. Therefore the donkey is perfectly adapted to the demanding local conditions.

The earliest FAO estimate of the Ethiopian donkey population was in 1961, when there were an estimated 3.7 million, in 1995 there were an estimated 5.2 million, an increase of 41% in 34 years, suggesting the donkey is not being made obsolete by technological advances. Ethiopia has the second highest number of donkeys of any country in the world after China, and virtually every rural household owns at least one.

Probably one of the most important functions of the donkey is that it relieves the women of much of the drudgery and exhaustion associated with gathering firewood, transporting water and other everyday chores. Without their beasts of burden the workload for these women is enormous. Carrying 25 kg of water for miles through the mountains once or twice a day is no joke. The resulting exhaustion makes the women more susceptible to the diseases of poverty, desperate for the women, and with inevitable ramifications for the entire household. Unsurprisingly Ethiopian women are extraordinarily fond of their donkeys and heartbreakingly, they weep on your shoulder if their donkey dies.

The importance of these animals to women is only just being fully appreciated, 27% of rural households in Tigray are now female headed. Many of these women live off the money they earn by gathering firewood that they sell in the local market. At dawn in any sizable town you see hundreds of donkeys laden with wood or charcoal driven by women converging on the market, many of them will have walked all night. Donkeys give these women the means to survive.

The donkey has a dual role in times of famine. It is not so well publicised, perhaps understandably, but when regions are stricken by drought it is the animals that are the first to die by the hundreds of thousands. As subsistence farmers are by definition reliant on their animals even in times of plenty, the loss of their animals during drought escalates a food



shortage for the people into a full-blown famine. At the present time the donkey has a new, but equally vital task, which is the distribution of food aid; trucks can only take the donated grain so far.

The donkey allows the farmers to come to distribution points and transport the grain back to their village. This avoids the necessity of moving to live near the food depots and therefore avoids the inevitable disease, squalor and poor sanitary conditions associated with these refugee camps. That is why donkeys are important.

The next question is, can the donkey be targeted to provide aid and food security for the people? As the life expectancy of an Ethiopian donkey is about a third of that of a British donkey and as a donkey costs about half of the average Ethiopian family's annual income, the answer is a resounding yes; with the added desirable advantage of relieving conditions of poor animal welfare. One organisation is already delivering practical help. The Donkey Sanctuary, a UK based animal welfare charity, was started over 30 years ago to help British donkeys. Today it has over 5,000 animals under its care in the UK and has incorporated the work of its sister charity The International Donkey Protection Trust. This has led to the establishment of operations in 6 countries providing veterinary care and training. It has also provided training to numerous veterinary students from developing nations.

In Ethiopia the Sanctuary runs clinics in three regions. A typical day finds one of the mobile clinics in a village in a remote part of north-eastern Tigray and, like most days, it is inundated with donkeys and mules. The objectives of the clinic are threefold; to provide free primary treatments to all animals in need; to provide training to local vets and to survey the donkey and mule population for possible future vaccination campaigns.

It is 42 degrees celsius and mid afternoon. There has been no rain here for months, and insufficient rain over the last two years. We are at 2400 metres, it is a barren, dusty, arid and mountainous landscape with no shade. This village is home to about two hundred and fifty households, each living in a single story stone dwelling, with a turf roof, one window, a door and a dirt floor. There is no electricity, running water or sanitation for 150 miles. This is shocking poverty. All the dwellings are walled into compounds to keep the ubiquitous hyena from the animals at night. We are 32 km from the nearest road and access is only possible because the clinic is built into a specially adapted Landrover. Work in the clinic started an hour before sunrise yet still now, 10 hours later, there are a large number of animals waiting for treatment, a crowd of enthusiastic farmers and a hundred or so curious children milling around.

There is an ongoing discussion between the team and the villagers about what they perceive as their major animal health problems and what they think the solutions are. Simultaneously two vets and an animal health assistant treat all the animals presented. About 150 have been treated for various ailments so far today, and all have been treated for gastrointestinal parasites. The local vet has also come along for training in equine medicine and to brief the project vets on the problems she has experienced in the region. Amidst all this activity a



delegation arrives from the neighbouring village, they want to know why the clinic is here and not at their village. They quickly become annoyed and the situation escalates into a heated argument between the inhabitants of the two villages. The newcomers are hastily assured that the clinic will go to their village later and they leave somewhat mollified. It is not unusual to see such passion over donkeys.

The Donkey Sanctuary has been running mobile clinics in the south of Ethiopia for 15 years and has treated over 150,000 animals there. The charity is now expanding into the north. The first phase of this new project is, in addition to treating all animals in need, to conduct a survey into factors affecting the health of the donkeys and mules. The results of this survey will shape the future direction of the project to ensure the monies available are used in the most effective fashion.

The Sanctuary works in close collaboration with the University of Addis Ababa and is headed by the founding Dean of the veterinary faculty, Professor Feseha Gebreab, considered the father of veterinary medicine in Ethiopia. The Donkey Sanctuary is not alone in showing an interest in these animals although it is, so far, the only organisation that is delivering practical clinical help. Amongst others The Department for International Development (DfID) recently commissioned a report into the donkeys here, looking for ways to reduce the impact of the cyclic famines experienced in the region. This interest is based on the refreshingly sensible assumption that the most logical place to start if you want to achieve sustainable development is with what the people know and are using at the moment; that the "technology" in situ is the most appropriate for development efforts.

The veterinary problems the teams face include most of the conditions seen by equine vets in Britain but, in addition, end stage disease rarely seen in Europe is common. There is also a whole plethora of tropical diseases, problematic fungal infections, virulent ocular infections, colics from eating plastic bags, parasites of every description and occasional cases of rabies and anthrax.

These are working animals, so harnessing wounds and back sores are universal. These injuries are extremely painful even to animals as stoical as donkeys and cause loss of condition and premature death unless cured. Another major problem is the horrific wounds inflicted by hyena. Surprisingly these animals are extremely common and can be heard at night even in the centres of the biggest cities. Fortunately, the vast majority of cases the teams see can be cured by the simplest measures and intervention. Small changes in husbandry, which the farmers are very willing to undertake can prevent them recurring.



The donkeys and mules themselves are immensely tolerant creatures, living intimately with

humans and always working, quietly enduring their lot. The memorial to the dead during the recent wars illustrates the relationship between donkeys and humans in Ethiopia. In the memorial a donkey is shown walking with a family.

The legacy of this war can still be seen today in both people and animals; shrapnel is occasionally removed from donkeys. Veterans often tell a story of a bank robbery to raise funds for the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front. The two fighters put the money on a donkey to make their escape. However, whilst returning to base they were unfortunately swept to their deaths by a swollen river. The donkey managed to cross, then made its own way for 50 km back to base, delivering the money, and passing into folklore.

Reaction to the project varies. In the UK some people are hugely enthusiastic, others say "why are you treating the donkeys not the people?" The truly symbiotic relationship between the rural families and their donkeys however, means that the people are being directly helped, hopefully in a way that is less likely to lead to a culture of dependency which the introduction of alien technology can do. Inevitably, it is impossible to ignore a child with some awful suppurating eye infection and drugs are carried with the mobile crews for these sorts of eventualities.

Here in Ethiopia sophisticates in Addis tend to laugh and say the donkey should be made obsolete. However, the Ethiopian veterinary community and, more importantly, the peasant farmers take donkey health very seriously indeed.

We move onto the neighbouring village. I hear the driver ask the first farmer, " In times of food shortage, which animal would you sell last?" Inevitably the farmer replies "my donkey".