

The Multi-dimensional Donkey in Landscapes of Donkey-Human Interaction ¹

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to spark interest and raise awareness about donkeys and their lives; and ultimately to help develop a worldwide network for donkey (animal) welfare and shape a more humane world. It aims to encourage greater collaboration between academics involved with animal studies, animal geographies and similar related disciplines, and those involved practically with the welfare of donkeys and mules around the world. It outlines the idea of a multi-dimensional landscape of donkey-human interaction to help us understand the complexity of factors shaping the place of donkeys in the world, and to provide a framework for practical engagement with donkeys and their users around the world. Through its case studies, it describes some lives lived by donkeys. And finally, written from the perspective of a British donkey welfare charity, The Donkey Sanctuary, it outlines an approach to assessing working donkey welfare building from a simple five-point welfare assessment tool; and it illustrates something of that work to bring about long-term improvements in donkey welfare.

Keywords: Donkey, mule, interspecific relationships, intraspecific relationships, human-animal interactions, working animals, working equids, animal geographies, animal welfare, animal charities.

¹ Much of the detail in this article and its case studies comes from work done by staff of The Donkey Sanctuary in UK, Europe, Ethiopia and Mexico, and its partners, including Donkey Sanctuary India, Donkey Sanctuary Kenya, the Society for the Protection and Care of Donkeys and Mules in Egypt, Animal Nepal, and the Bonaire Donkey Sanctuary. The author cannot name all the staff involved but would like to express his gratitude and appreciation for all the great work they do. The diagram of the “Hand” was drawn by Angie Garner in The Donkey Sanctuary International Department. The archeological information came from Jill Goulder (UCL) and William Clarence-Smith (SOAS) and I am grateful for their scholarship.

1. AUTHOR'S FOREWORD – THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL DONKEY

Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, talks about “the danger of a single story” – a single descriptive narrative for a group or nation that excludes all their other narratives (2009). So too with donkeys: too often they are thought of in the light of a single story, a story that helps make comfortable the worldview of the observer. I could have called this article *The multi-storied donkey* but it sounds too much like a car park.

In the Celtic language, instead of saying individuals “are” something, qualities are layered on them, a bit like Photoshop or Geographical Information System software, and constricting attributes are avoided. So donkeys would not “be” stoical, but the quality of stoicism would be on a donkey. So, I could have called this article *The multi-layered donkey*.

Instead, the title of this article is chosen partly for alliteration and partly in a nod to physics. In physics, the universe as a whole can seem relatively simple storied just space and time; however, at an individual level, the tiny building blocks turn out to be more extraordinarily multi-dimensional.



Figure 1. – An Egyptian rural donkey enjoying his food.



Figure 2. – An Indian brick kiln donkey: miserable, thin, wounded, lame and ill.

Likewise, when considered generically, “the life of a donkey” can sound a simple thing; however, for individual donkeys, each living its life in its own unique set of circumstances, the factors affecting it are more complex, and its life is more extraordinarily multi-dimensional (see *fig. 1* and *2*).

2. INTRODUCTION

There are around 51 million donkeys and mules in the world (FAO 2011). This number is a “guesstimate” because no one counts donkeys – they are the forgotten equid. The vast majority work alongside some of the world’s poorest people making an essential contribution to their livelihoods. Above all, they help hold communities together through work that includes moving water and firewood, agricultural produce, building materials, and people, and supporting agricultural production through ploughing. In this way, they directly support life for people and other animals; help give access to markets; free poor people, particularly women, from drudgery; and, free time for community activity and education. In times of drought and other natural disasters, their contribution can make the difference between a community surviving, or disintegrating and drifting to an aid camp.

They do all this with minimal attention or recognition from formal service providers such as government agencies, agricultural extension services, animal health service providers such as harness makers, farriers and vets, or development agencies.

This article is about donkeys: as individual sentient beings whose experience of life is unique; as a species with common needs, shared traits, and facing similar challenges; and as an “every-animal” on the back of which sits the baggage of every theoretical discourse about relationships between animals, human and non-human.

Its purpose is to spark interest in donkeys, their lives and what it is to be a donkey; and to encourage greater involvement in protecting their welfare and collaboration in a worldwide network for donkey (animal) welfare. In doing this, it aims to raise questions about donkeys, donkey welfare and human animal interactions more generally; while grounding theoretical ideas in the lives of real donkeys.

It uses case studies which illustrate some lives lived by donkeys. These do not claim to be deeply researched. Their purpose is to show how some of the “multiple dimensions” come together (see *tab. 1*).

Table 1. – Case study 1: Brick kiln donkeys:
background and examples from Egypt and India.*

Donkeys working in brick kilns can be a sad sight: miserable, thin, wounded, lame, and ill. The Donkey Sanctuary, its partners and other equine welfare charities work at brick kilns using donkeys and mules in Egypt, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Brick kilns are an ancient industry. Today's brick kilns supply the millions of bricks used to build the expanding suburbs and industrial estates of rapidly urbanising societies. They can be a lucrative small business but generally rely on cheap labour. They tend to be found in groups – anything from a handful to hundreds – often just outside the boundaries of major cities with their clean air regulations.

They are organised differently in different places. Even adjacent brick kilns, though apparently identical, may have marked differences in culture. In Egypt these differences can include the levels of power and influence between owners (some are owned individually, some by groups of businessmen), stockmen, adult workers and child workers; who owns the donkeys; and in levels of welfare for human and animal workers. As with groups of people everywhere, some owners and workers are more compassionate than others, although only very few seem genuinely uncaring of suffering.

Having concentrated on free treatment visits in the early years of its work at the brick kilns of El Saff, Egypt, The Donkey Sanctuary introduced a “whole community” approach in 2010 which included looking at the human, social and environmental factors operating on the donkeys within the brick kilns. The change of approach brought measurable improvements in welfare: beating and harness wounds decreased dramatically; as did bite wounds and hoof problems – the last two because outside yards were built onto stables providing more space and access to sunlight and dry standing.

Mules, which are of much higher value, generally fare better than donkeys. Some brick kiln mules in India are looked after beautifully – with individually fitted harness and carts, and farriery and veterinary care – and they may look as good at the end of a brick kiln season as they did at the start. But this is not always the case, and particularly for donkeys working in the same area of brick kilns; their welfare can be as bad as that of any donkeys and mules anywhere. In these situations, donkeys receive no formal care as they are of too little value for their owners to access the harness, farriery or veterinary care used by mule owners. Often they share their level of poor welfare with the children and other labourers working alongside them. In the brick kilns of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal, it appears that end of life donkeys are being transported in from India to be worked to death.

All this raises the question: are brick-kiln donkeys and mules, well looked after and given the same consideration as human coworkers, part of a low carbon future; or are they an historic hangover that needs to be ended through

* “Brick kiln” in this context means a factory making fired.

a move to full mechanisation of the brick-making process everywhere? Not all brick kilns use donkeys and mules.

Traditions and trends in donkey use vary, and brick kilns are no exception. In some areas of India, the contracted donkey and human labourers are from the local community. Out of season, donkeys do other work (for example in agriculture or pot making communities) in a relatively stable system that has been similar for years. These donkeys are often the luckiest: their owners will take on realistic seasonal contracts regarding the numbers of bricks they will produce, and the donkeys are well looked after and given rest. However also contracted are migrant workers and their donkeys from poorer neighbouring states whose peripatetic lives are lived chasing seasonal work wherever they can find it. These people and their animals have little bargaining power, and often end up with onerous brick-making targets.

Yet the dynamics of donkey ownership and use are constantly changing. It was illuminating to staff from the Donkey Sanctuary India (a partner of The Donkey Sanctuary) during a recent base-line survey at brick-kilns in Mehsana, Gujarat, to talk to people drifting into working with donkeys for the first time, and to see some of the welfare problems that result.

As one staff member reported:

When the Ahmedabad team went back to the brick kilns that they had selected to work in because the welfare of the donkeys was the worst in those brick kilns, they discovered that for some of the families the root causes of the poor welfare was because the families had never owned donkeys before. In one brick kiln they came across a couple of donkeys with beating wounds. When the Community Partnership officer began to talk to the family who owned them, she discovered that the woman was a widow with 4 daughters. Working with the donkeys was their last resort to earn enough money to live by and it was their first time ever owning and working with donkeys. In another brick kiln, which the Ahmedabad team had ranked as the kiln with the worst welfare problems, they spent a lot of time developing a relationship with the community, including going to the extent of helping them to put temporary roofs on their homes, as the families were sleeping without a roof. When they gently started to examine the donkeys belonging to one family, the sons came up to the vets and said: "Please help us, Sir, it is our first time owning donkeys".

This shows how important it is to carry out the community partnership side of our work, especially in the base line surveys. It is easy just to put poor donkey welfare down to lack of empathy. However, in spending time understanding the community, we also come to realise that poor welfare is not always due to lack of empathy, but can also be due to the fact that the people have never owned donkeys before and do not have the basic knowledge or skills. Since that first visit, one son in the family has developed an interest in becoming a community animal health worker.

3. THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

This article is written from the perspective of a British donkey welfare charity, The Donkey Sanctuary, that cares for donkeys in sanctuaries and through a network of foster homes in UK, Ireland and mainland Europe; works to improve the welfare of working donkeys worldwide through core projects employing local staff in India, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya and Mexico and other “small grant” collaborations; and, provides donkey-assisted therapy to people (mainly children) with special needs.

The sanctuary is aware that its perspective on donkeys is culturally defined and just one of many. This article is part of a process of engagement to open discussion and encourage ideas from alternative viewpoints. Its aim is to constantly improve its effectiveness.

Table 2 (The Donkey Sanctuary) provides background about The Donkey Sanctuary; and *table 3 (Case study 2: End of work, feral and sanctuary donkeys, and the “politics of care”)* gives further background to how donkeys may end up in Sanctuaries (see *tab. 2* and *3*).

Table 2. – The Donkey Sanctuary.

The Donkey Sanctuary is:

- UK-based;
- the largest international donkey and mule-specific animal welfare charity;
- totally reliant on private donations.

It has four inter-linked strands of work:

1. With working donkeys:
 - a. two parallel but increasingly integrated programmes:
 - i. outside Europe 5 core locally-staffed projects – India, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mexico,
 - ii. various smaller “minor” projects;
 - b. entirely local staff;
 - c. partnership with communities – community-based approaches;
 - d. education and training-based approaches “life-long learning” principles.
2. Homing, e.g. Sanctuaries mainly in UK and Europe.
3. Tracking, investigation and response to other challenges facing donkeys.
4. Donkey-assisted therapy using a range of models.

Table 3. – Case study 2: End of work, feral and sanctuary donkeys, and the “politics of care”.

The Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth, UK; Animal Nepal in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal; and the Bonaire Donkey Sanctuary, Bonaire, Dutch Antilles, Caribbean.

When donkeys are no longer needed for work, they may be killed, looked after by their owner until they die, left to fend for themselves within the community, or go properly feral, forming wild-living bands; and in a few places they may find their way to a sanctuary.

Huge populations of feral donkeys live in the Australian outback, in northern Mexico and southern USA, and on many islands, for example in the Caribbean where they were introduced to work alongside slaves on plantations.

As well as providing homes for some lucky homeless donkeys, sanctuaries can have a particular role as part of a plan for dealing with an out of control feral population, or where donkeys need to be rescued from extreme abuse.

The Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth, UK, started in 1968 after the founder rescued a group of donkeys she had found in terrible condition passing through a market, and was then unexpectedly left a much larger group in a Will. This was the start of what is now the world’s largest donkey sanctuary and donkey-specific international animal welfare organisation. Since that time it has rescued around 15,000 donkeys and is still responsible for around 4,000, some in sanctuary, some out in foster homes where they provide companionship, or in donkey-assisted therapy or rehabilitation centres where they provide physical, mental and emotional therapy for children or others with additional or other specific needs.

Animal Nepal’s donkey sanctuary in the Kathmandu valley is at the opposite end of the spectrum for size, with only a few donkeys. Each of these has been rescued in extreme circumstances from a brick kiln industry that imports end of life donkeys from India and works them to death. Some are foals left beside a mother, left for dead. When working in such extreme circumstances, this sanctuary plays a vital role in protecting the mental and emotional health of the charity’s staff. The charity’s workers do their work because they care, and without somewhere to nurse at least some donkeys back to life, the work would become intolerable.

The Bonaire Donkey Sanctuary on Bonaire, an island in the Dutch Antilles, in the Caribbean, is part of an humane long term solution to a problem which has feral donkeys facing injury and abuse as they come increasingly into competition with human inhabitants of the island. All male donkeys taken into the sanctuary are castrated so gradually the population will die out naturally.

Each of these sanctuaries goes beyond its care and protection mission. All are engaged in wider community education about animals and the environment, involving schools and other local institutions. Animal Nepal’s sanctuary is becoming a holistic environmental education centre. The Donkey Sanctuaries in UK and Bonaire both help children with additional needs – one formally and one informally. The Bonaire sanctuary is open to visitors who are allowed to wander among the donkeys. Holiday-makers with autistic children return repeatedly reporting that their children are calmed by their time with the donkeys.

All become involved in “the politics of care”. This describes a process in which those involved initially in rescue and rehabilitation of animals end up becoming active politically in order to address the underlying problems. The typical example was of rescuers of injured raptors in California who ended up successfully engaging with the state planning authorities in order to preserve patterns of wild forest that could support wild populations of raptors and other animals in the face of aggressive real estate developers (Michel 1998). The founder of The Donkey Sanctuary in UK became involved in parliamentary committees to address animal welfare nationally; the Bonaire Donkey Sanctuary has engaged similarly in finding long term political solutions; and, Animal Nepal is campaigning internationally against “blood-bricks”.

4. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL DONKEYS, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL LANDSCAPE – ANIMAL GEOGRAPHIES

As human beings, all our work with animals, species and eco-systems is essentially about the relationships between people and these living individuals and systems

“Animal geographies” is a relatively new area of study that uses tools and ideas from physical geography, such as the concept of a landscape we can look out across, to help explore and analyse the complex multi-dimensional landscape of animal-human relationships. The real world physical landscape with its three dimensions is the obvious starting point in this exploration: all donkeys live somewhere.

Archeologists add the dimension of time, with evidence that donkeys were native to the arid, stony deserts of north and north-eastern Africa (Beja-Pereira et al. 2004), the original wild populations possibly extending into Arabia and the southern Levant (Kimura et al. 2011). They were likely to have been first recruited for work in multiple separate locations. There is intriguing evidence from SW Iran of early 5th millennium BC working donkeys, in the form of a painted pottery sherd showing a donkey with an apparent blanket or saddle-bag (Potts 2011). More bone and clay-model evidence then appears in the 4th millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Levant, and numerous depictions in the 3rd millennium BC in Egypt, by which time donkey-caravans were an established transport system (Goulder 2013). Visitors to Cairo can see donkeys represented doing agricultural work in relief carvings on the walls of a temple by the Great Pyramids. It is possible that, perhaps uniquely, donkeys were domesticated primarily for

transport rather than for consumption, or hunting, security and companionship, and may have played an important role in the expansion of early human civilization.

Since those early days, donkeys have been taken nearly all over the world. They have adapted well in dry areas similar to where they evolved and there are now enormous feral donkey populations in Australia, on islands in the Caribbean, and in northern Mexico and parts of the southern United States. Although they survive, they thrive less well in colder, wetter places and climates. In particular their feet, evolved for dry hard or sandy ground, can become water-logged in wet conditions, leading to the “Aladdin’s shoes” overgrown hooves seen in so many neglected British rescued donkeys.

Physical location carries other implications, for example on disease – for example arthropod disease vectors are usually agro-ecologically specific; and on human factors such as patterns of rural, peri-urban, or urban living, levels of poverty and opportunity, and the pace of social change. Donkeys providing transport, often rented out, can be seen weaving through the streets of rapidly growing towns and cities (and being hit by cars), and work in construction sites, carrying loads of building materials to the top of high-rise buildings (which they sometimes fall off). Though making a valuable contribution to the local economy, their poor owners sometimes camping, sometimes living in basic rented accommodation, rarely have land to keep them safely at night so they may be left to graze freely. Those that wander onto another person’s land may get slashed by someone angry that their garden has been destroyed. Generally donkey welfare is worse where people’s lives are socially chaotic and/or in economic transition.

Already we are talking about other dimensions that come into play on top of the underlying physical landscape. *Table 4 (Examples of the different dimensions to our relationships with donkeys)* gives other examples of dimensions to our relationships with donkeys. Each of these provides a viewpoint from which to consider what it is to be a donkey and its welfare, or requires consideration when working to improve the welfare of donkeys or when considering where they could be better employed or for other reasons and interests. The case studies illustrate these through specific examples (see *tab. 4*).

See also Case studies:

- *Table 1 (Case study 1: Brick kiln* donkeys: background and examples from Egypt and India);*
- *Table 3 (Case study 2: End of work, feral and sanctuary donkeys, and the “politics of care”);*
- *Table 7 (Case study 3: Cultural, historic, artistic and mythical donkeys).*

Table 4. – Examples of the different dimensions to our relationships with donkeys.

<p>DONKEYS AS DONKEYS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• species and individual biology – how do we meet their basic needs?• genetics including mules and hinnies as genetic chimeras – how does this help us understand their different behaviour and needs?• individual character – being a donkey – should we and could we respond to individual donkey needs? <p>TIME AND SPACE – ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• evolution – where donkeys evolved; where, when and why they spread geographically; and where they are now – and how this affects their nature and the way we care for and interact with them;• agro-ecological effects on temperature, climate, and disease vectors, etc.;• domestication – historical and recent trends;• changing patterns of work;• differences between rural, peri-urban and urban environments. <p>NOT-USED/USED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• spectrum from wild through different types of work to feral;• the contribution donkeys make to human society and to specific human communities;• different situations of use, e.g. routine daily life, conflict and war, other disasters and emergencies;• different types of work, e.g. power, traction, transport, producer, therapist, companion;• types of physical work, e.g. traction including ploughing and pulling (technically pushing!) carts; and carrying loads, e.g. water, wood, agricultural produce, building materials; working power wheels;• types of production – milk, meat, skins;• emerging uses, e.g. sport and entertainment;• seasonality of use.	<p>HUMAN CULTURAL (TRADITION/HABIT)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• traditional and cultural attitudes to donkeys;• religious/spiritual/moral/philosophical aspects;• social and economic opportunities and constraints;• legislation and regulation, for example, legal definition, levels of protection;• conflicts between different human cultural viewpoints. <p>REPRESENTATION AND DECORATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• metaphorical, representational, linguistic, decorative and adorned – what this tells us about, and how it shapes, attitudes. <p>HUMAN-INDIVIDUAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• intra-cultural differences and attitudes;• age and gender differences – for example, are there differences between male and female donkey owners and users?• ethical spectrum from kindness to cruelty;• wealth/poverty, access to information and resources. <p>POLITICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• politics of care – sanctuaries as power-stations generating caring energy used to bring change;• political science – can working donkeys be brought into a form of citizenship with their welfare protected in line with other workers;• inter/national politics – how changes in human politics bring changes in tolerance and attitudes to animals (for example, Bonaire, Dutch Antilles). <p>ECOLOGICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• foreignness and donkeys as “pests” – excusing violence and cruelty;• carbon-friendliness – an opportunity to foster respect in a post-modern world?
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5. ASSESSING WELFARE

From the perspective of a donkey welfare charity, it is important to look more closely at the issue of welfare and welfare assessment as understanding and assessing welfare is fundamental to our work. Yet, just as for human beings, defining and agreeing good welfare is not straightforward and there are many viewpoints.

Table 5 (Examples of reasons for assessing welfare and levels of welfare assessment) outlines some reasons for assessing welfare, and gives examples of how different levels of welfare assessment apply in different situations (see *tab. 5*).

Table 5. – Examples of reasons for assessing welfare and levels of welfare assessment.

PURPOSES OF WELFARE ASSESSMENT INCLUDE:

For society generally:

- to guide establishment, monitoring and enforcement of welfare regulations and legislation.

For donkey owning and using communities:

- to monitor the health and welfare of their animals in order to optimise care and productivity.

For those involved in working with or providing services for animals:

- to ensure best practice standards of care when working with donkeys;
- to identify service opportunities.

For a welfare charity:

- to understand patterns of donkey welfare around the world, to identify places and situations where intervention is a priority, and to be clear why we are working where we are working;
- when done jointly with donkey owners, to increase community buy-in to the process of improving the welfare and efficiency of their working animals;
- to set welfare improvement priorities and targets and to monitor and assess the effectiveness of our work;
- to communicate better the impact of our work for auditing and reporting to our donors;
- for reflection, and for learning and sharing lessons with others – locally between communities, in-country, regionally and internationally;
- to provide evidence for higher-level influencing, policy and research work.

LEVELS OF WELFARE ASSESSMENT INCLUDE:

- quick “scoping” needs assessment to overview welfare globally;
- in-depth needs assessment involving donkey-based indicators and social research across “multi-dimensions” to provide detailed base-line information against which to assess impact and effectiveness of work and to compare different approaches;
- community-driven assessments to generate community ownership of welfare work and to power community commitment to a process of improving the welfare and efficiency of their working animals.

A widely accepted framework for assessing animal welfare is the “Five Freedoms”:

- freedom from hunger and thirst;
- freedom from physical discomfort (generally meaning shelter, bedding, etc.);
- freedom from injury and disease;
- freedom from fear and distress;
- freedom to perform natural behaviours.

These came out of consideration for the welfare of animals in the emerging phenomenon of factory farms in the late 1960’s (FAWC 1979), and would generally be assessed through observation during a farm visit.

While welfare principles remain the same for working animals, the five freedoms are not as easily assessed for working animals through straightforward observation, because working animals are often kept individually or in small numbers, and are generally seen while out working rather than “at home”. For practical purposes, the Donkey Sanctuary has therefore developed a graphic or “tool”, essentially a hand, we call “Hands-on Donkey Welfare” (see *fig. 3*) – which outlines a consistent and memorable framework to help us compare and assess the welfare of individual or groups of donkeys in our work worldwide.

The thumb and fingers each represent specific donkey-based welfare indicators and point to some specific related areas of possible further enquiry or intervention.

The thumb represents demeanour/behaviour and the quality of communication between donkey and human. Observation of behaviour remains the best way to see the world from the donkey’s perspective; and good communication is the key to improving every other aspect of welfare, just as it is between humans.

The fingers represent body condition score; wounds; lameness; and other signs of ill health. They point to such things as nutrition; harness quality; how the donkey uses its body; and access to health care knowledge, skills and services.

These indicators are rooted in the knuckles which represent the major underlying causes of poor welfare. These include culture and tradition; habit and attitude; husbandry, management and working practice; and socio-economic conditions. Addressing these is another essential component of helping donkeys to have a good life.

All these lead to the palm – the most important, but most easily overlooked part of the diagram. The palm represents “the whole life of the donkey” – its relationships, age demographics, how old it is when it starts work, and what happens to it at the end of its working life, etc. – its whole unique story.

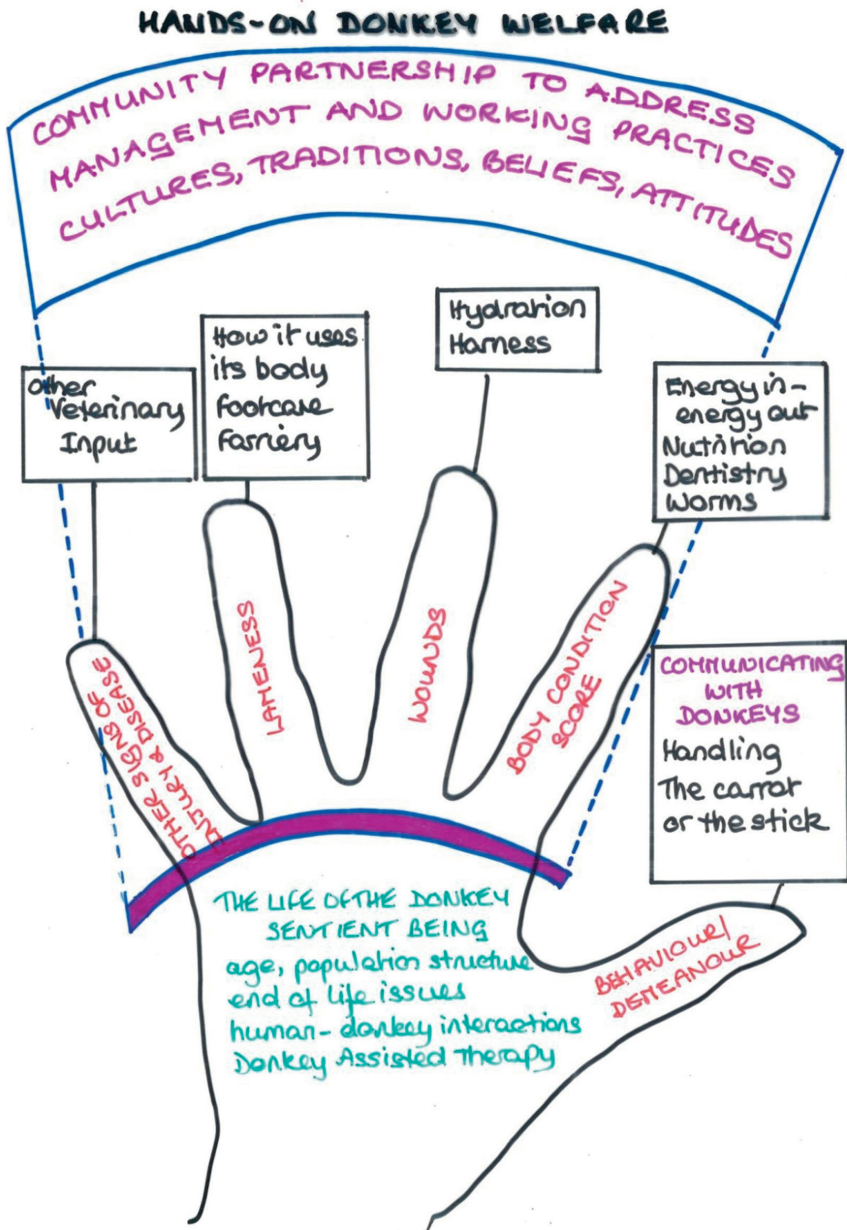


Figure 3. – “Hands-on Donkey Welfare” – A welfare assessment and training tool.

Welfare assessment involves systematic observation of donkey-based indicators of welfare backed up by other complementary lines of enquiry and investigation. As already mentioned, these include donkey demographics, management, and end of life issues; local human factors such as knowledge and skills, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs; and seasonal factors including nutrition, work, and other health and welfare problems.

In practical donkey welfare work, background information would not all be collected at the same time as this would be overly intrusive and overwhelm the community of people and donkeys. A balance has to be struck, a constructive working relationship with people and donkeys grows, and the knowledge base gradually accumulates.

Table 6 (*Comparison of the “Hand” with the “Five Freedoms”*) compares the “Hand” to the “Five Freedoms” showing how they cover similar areas of understanding but with slightly different emphasis (see *tab. 6*).

Table 6. – *Comparison of the “Hand” with the “Five Freedoms”.*

HAND	FIVE FREEDOMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• behaviour/demeanour – communication between people and donkeys;• body condition score;• (NB background information including husbandry and management dealt with across knuckles);• wounds and lameness;• other signs of injury and disease.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• freedom to perform natural behaviours;• freedom from hunger and thirst;• freedom from physical discomfort (that is, shelter);• freedom from pain and distress;• freedom from injury and disease.

6. THE LIFE OF THE DONKEY

All donkeys exist somewhere along the spectrum from wild through various forms of work to feral or other “retirement solutions” such as sanctuaries (see *fig. 4* below; *tab. 1* and *2* above; *tab. 7* below). Within this spectrum are interesting specific situations that blur simple distinctions such as the semi-feral communal donkey herds reported for some agro-pastoralists, and the specific intention, when there were wild donkeys, to encourage cross-breeding between wild and domestic stock.

Few, if any, donkeys are genuinely wild now. Most work, mainly as “beasts of burden” for transport of people, water, goods. They have been used for ploughing since the 3rd millennium BC and there is currently a reported rise in use of donkeys for ploughing particularly for poor, female

farmers in Africa. There is a growing “production” population – donkeys kept for milk, meat or skin – the last mostly in China where an extract of donkey skin is considered to have beneficial medicinal and cosmetic value. Other forms of work are emerging – as companions, therapists, and in sport and entertainment. Donkey basketball and mule high-diving, both in the USA, are some of the more bizarre of these entertainments.

Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson, political scientists, have postulated that working animals could be brought into a form of citizenship with worker’s rights akin to human workers’ rights enshrined in law, as a way to deal with concerns about their treatment and welfare (Donaldson 2012).

Whatever and wherever donkeys work, each will one day have to start work and one day “retire”.

Where there is a good tradition of work care, young donkeys will train alongside older working donkeys until they are old enough to work themselves. A donkey taken into physical work too early may become damaged, be unable to move and work efficiently, and face a lifetime of physical discomfort or pain.

On retirement some people will continue to care for their donkeys but many donkeys are abandoned to fend for themselves, dumped (a donkey in our Sanctuary in Rumania was rescued from an open sewer in Bucharest), or even tied up and left either to be eaten by wild animals or to starve. Only in a few places is there the option of slaughter for meat and or skins, and paradoxically the end-of-life value may lead to better care while they are alive. This is seen particularly in China where donkey meat is highly prized but pockets of donkey meat consumption exist on most continents. Donkeys are shipped across Europe to Italy for specialist meats such as salami; and illicit consumption is leading to theft of good condition well looked-after donkeys in for example parts of India and Kenya. However in most places there seems to be a cultural reluctance to eat donkey meat.

Being taken into work can happen on a large scale when new groups of people take on donkeys sometimes as a result of a development programme, sometimes because of other social changes. Sadly introduction of donkeys is rarely accompanied by any training in how to communicate, harness, look after or work effectively with them.

Retirement may also happen on a large scale, for example when vehicle prices are low and credit becomes available, leading, as recently happened in Sikar, India, to a group of owners of urban donkey delivery carts all selling their donkeys to buy a motorised delivery truck; or when an industry stops or through government policy. The current agricultural mechanisation policy in Brazil is an example of the last – with thousands of donkeys reported to have gone feral as a result.

As with individual donkeys, large groups of out-of-work donkeys may be slaughtered where there is a market. Where there is no slaughter option, but where there is extensive open land as in Brazil, donkeys may go feral; and in some places, some donkeys may be taken into sanctuary (see *tab. 3* and *fig. 4*).

Table 7 (Case study 3: Cultural, historic, depicted and mythical donkeys) gives background to early donkey use, as well as mentioning briefly how donkeys have come to be represented in culture, myth and art (see *tab. 7*).

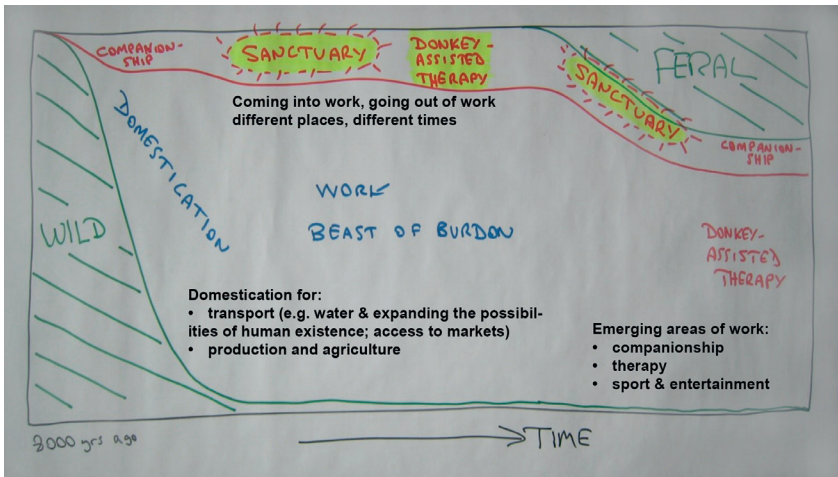


Figure 4. – *The wild through work to feral spectrum.*

Table 7. – *Case study 3: Cultural, historic, depicted and mythical donkeys.*

An enquiry arrives from Iran about donkeys there. This is a refreshing insight as my recent thinking about Iran has been dominated by political news, not by stories of donkeys. In the main text of this article I have already mentioned the painted sherd found in Iran with the earliest ever artistic record of a working donkey, so there is a very long history of working donkeys in Iran. Clearly working donkeys in Iran are not a new phenomenon.

Similar historical dimensions illuminate the stories of donkeys and mules in many places.

Evidence for the place of donkeys in history comes from myths, stories, early administrative or business texts on clay tablets, religion texts and other forms of representation and art. Numerous seemingly ceremonial burials of pairs of

donkeys in the third-millennium BC in the Ancient Near East, alone or in elite human graves, imply high status, although the tradition of being rude about donkeys was apparent even in 3rd-M Sumerian texts (Way 2011).

The use of donkey caravans has been a vital resource for trade for millennia. For example donkey caravans in the 3rd millennium BC carried wine and oil from Canaan to Egypt and pack goods over the Zagros mountains between Iraq and Iran; and in the 2nd millennium there was a famous caravan trade between Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Ancient cuneiform texts also document use of donkeys for ploughing and carts, together with commentary on their breeding and foddering. Donkey caravans continue to be important in parts of Africa for example in carrying salt from Afar to Tigray in Ethiopia, and for pack transport in the West African Sahel.

The history of mule production (mules are a non-fertile cross between a female horse and a male donkey) is rich and surprising (Clarence-Smith 2013). The mule trade in Argentina in the 19th Century produced thousands of mules each year which went to die horribly rapidly in the Potosi silver mines of Bolivia. The production system was as involved as modern broiler chicken systems – with separate breeding lines supplying the specific types of horses and donkeys required to produce a specific quality of mule.

On a smaller scale, a hinny culture (a hinny is a non-fertile cross between a female donkey and a male horse) existed in Cyprus with many exported to Egypt for use by the British Army in the early part of the 20th Century (Clarence-Smith 2013).

Myth and cultural and artistic representation also provide valuable insight into how people perceive donkeys and mules. In Christian cultures, Jesus Christ rode a donkey and, in the Bible, a donkey is the only animal apart from the serpent that speaks. The god Sheetala in Hindu culture is depicted riding a donkey. Donkeys are also depicted in other art including the Bayeux tapestry, and many European paintings with religious themes.

While many ancient trades and traditions have disappeared, some have endured, and an understanding of history can help when engaging with modern donkey owners. An enduring tradition does not necessarily mean an unchanging tradition – for example many new health care practices are adopted by livestock owners through both formal and informal channels. Participatory community development exercises can help donkey welfare charities to share ideas and engage respectfully with traditional knowledge and processes of change.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has laid out a framework for considering the situation of each donkey that lives in the world, where it is and the factors shaping its life. Humans load donkeys physically, and in common with many other animals, also metaphorically by loading them with meanings that have little to

do with their nature but can end up affecting their lives. Most donkeys live under human ownership and care so we have a responsibility to help make their lives good lives.

Returning to the quote from Chimamanda Adichie at the start of this article, every group of donkeys and every individual donkey has its own story. This will be a product of its individual nature, the circumstances of its birth, the place it lives, the character and changing fortunes of its immediate family (including an owner when one exists), the work options available, the wider social environment in which it lives, and finally its retirement and end of life options.

In all this donkeys are similar to most other animals, human or non-human.

8. AFTER WORD

In the Nile delta, Egypt, an old lady brought her donkey to a mobile clinic run by the Society for the Protection and Welfare of the Donkeys and Mules of Egypt (SPWDME), a partner of The Donkey Sanctuary. For cultural reasons it is rare for women to bring their donkeys so a SPWDME vet took the opportunity to ask her what she thought about the SPWDME work. She said: “Just keep talking about donkeys. No one else is”.

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