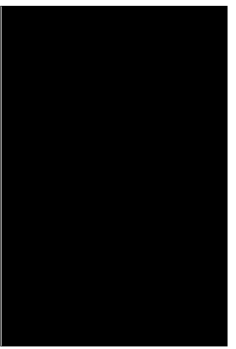


v e t t a l k

Donkeys to have their day at OP



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The quirky character of a donkey is the heart of its appeal – those expressive eyes and cheeky, stubborn nature. But for thousands, if not millions of people in South Africa, a donkey is working beast.

In rural parts of this country, the donkey is the only form of transportation – he carries people or goods all around the neighbourhood. Despite his vital role, he is often mistreated and very often misunderstood.

Some donkeys are abandoned because their owners can no longer care for them, or they find an alternative form of transport, like a new bakkie. During their working lives, donkeys are often asked to pull loads well over reasonable requests (a donkey can pull 700 kg over flat ground, but shouldn't be asked to do so every day), are fitted with the most unsuitable harnesses and often left to find their own supper and even their water on occasion. Some donkeys are tied to a post at night to ensure they can't run away, which leaves them vulnerable to predators stalking the area. All of these forms of neglect and abuse inflict suffering – open sores, sore limbs and back and empty tummies and very thirsty if the owner decides to sleep in late.

Vets too, often misunderstand the medical needs of donkeys – those that they get to

see. Many vets think that a donkey is just a small horse, a myth which just isn't true. There are differences to their physiology that need to be taken into account. Incorrectly interpreting an ailment can lead to unsuccessful diagnosis and treatment.

Abuse and suffering

The most suffering in South Africa is due to droughts, motor vehicle accidents and lack of care, often due to lack of knowledge. Donkeys can get into people's vegetable gardens and are sometimes stoned to chase them away.

However, some real cruelty has also been described. Because donkeys have a strong survival instinct, they will refuse to do something that they feel is dangerous or against their best interest. This behaviour is commonly interpreted as stubbornness. When someone cruel and ignorant about donkeys wants a ride, the donkey will often refuse to move. Animal welfare organisations have described how, to ensure they get a ride, youths wrap plastic around barbed wire (to protect their hands) and whip the donkey, drawing blood, until it flees in self-preservation. Sometimes people pour petrol over a donkey's rear and set it alight, laughing as the burning animal runs away, terrified.

Medical misunderstanding

Despite there being hundreds of thousands of donkeys in South Africa, vets have never been specifically taught how to treat their medical ailments. A donkey with an abdominal pain will display his discomfort differently to a horse, which means that it is easy to get a diagnosis wrong. There are also no stock remedies registered under Act 36 (Act on Farm feed Fertilisers and Stock remedies under which all over the counter dips and stock remedies are registered) specifically or even inclusively for donkeys, although a certain number are registered for horses.

In collaboration

To combat this lack of knowledge the University of Pretoria, in collaboration with the International Donkey Sanctuary Charity, has introduced a session on donkey care into the veterinary programme. Two lectures have been added to the fifth year; a practical session to the final year clinics and post graduate participation encouraged, so that the vets of the future will be properly equipped to care for these neglected beasts of burden.

The Veterinary Faculty of the University of Pretoria, at Onderstepoort is working with the Donkey Sanctuary, situated just outside Sidmouth



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in the UK, to educate its students on the veterinary profile, surgery and primary health care needs of donkeys in South Africa. Vets from the sanctuary have made two visits (once in 2006 and once in 2007) to give lectures to students. There are also plans afoot for future visits to share their expertise in donkey care.

Five donkeys were brought in by their owners during the donkey care week. This is the most donkeys that have ever been in the hospital at one time. All the little grey, long-ears gazed up at the large Warmblood and Friesian horses in wonder! The large horses were equally astounded. Castrations of three of them were used as teaching cases – watch-and-learn as opposed to a hands-on practical. The operations were filmed and will be used for further training of veterinarians both in South Africa and worldwide.

Making their presence felt

The Donkey Sanctuary was started by Dr Elizabeth D Svendsen in 1969 and has taken over 12 000 donkeys into its care. The donkeys come to the sanctuary for various reasons, but often they come from lives of neglect and abuse. No donkey is refused admission and occasionally some are given to carefully screened foster homes.

The Donkey Sanctuary works in third world countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Mexico and India to help alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering of working donkeys.

Teams in Africa and working on other continents offer free veterinary care and practical advice to thousands of donkey owners. They have even gone as far as to offer specially-made harnesses to owners. Unfortunately for the donkey, the owner often discards the gift because it takes three or four minutes longer to prepare his animal for the day's work ahead. But there can be no denying what a difference the Donkey Sanctuary is making to these animals.

Working in Kenya

After a visit to the small island of Lamu, just off the mainland of Kenya, Dr Svendsen set up a clinic for the treatment of the working donkeys. (Until recently, donkeys have been the main form of transportation on the island; they carry agricultural products, household provisions and building materials.)

In the space of a year, the Lamu Sanctuary provided 5 500 treatments free of charge. The bi-annual deworming alone made a huge difference to the health of the animals. And since the start of an annual competition to find the donkey in the best condition, a huge improvement has been seen.

On the mainland, the sanctuary works with the Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (KSPCA). Since forging a partnership



in 1994, the sanctuary has set up a treatment room specifically for donkeys in the KSPCA in Nairobi. There are also two mobile clinics and a third vehicle used as an ambulance and education centre roaming the country.

One of the biggest problems that is being dealt with is the bad design of carts and harnesses – ignorant owners are forcing the donkey to pull from the neck instead of the chest. In an attempt to rectify the situation, the sanctuary is teaching people how to make correctly designed carts and harnesses using local, inexpensive materials.

As you can imagine, this is an expensive business. The Donkey Sanctuary's overseas work is funded solely by donations.

Back home

In South Africa, Dr Sheila Higgerty donates a lot of her time to voluntary work with donkeys in the Gauteng area. Both veterinary and nursing students and staff of the Veterinary Faculty (www.up.ac.za – follow the link to veterinary faculty outreach) also assist in outreach to donkeys, as does the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals (www.nspca.co.za). Abused and

neglected donkeys have also found sanctuary at the Barnyard Donkey Rescue and Sanctuary outside George. Marge and Le Roi Wilmore gave up everything with any sort of monetary value in order to fund a centre for rescued donkeys. They run a kennel and cattery and a small restaurant to make ends meet. The sanctuary is open to the public – the donkeys love the attention from visitors. **M**

Donations to donkey welfare

If you would like to assist Marge and Le Roi, contact them on 044-876 0075. Donations to the NSPCA can be done through the website (www.nspca.co.za). Educational donations to outreach at the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria (tel 012-529 8075 during working hours or e-mail Cheryl.mccrindle@up.ac.za).

There is also a wealth of information donkey care on the Donkey Sanctuary website: www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk.