

Conference Review: The first Pan-African seminar on working equines (March 2010)

At the end of March I left the dismal weather in the UK for the sunny Gambia to present at the first Pan-African Conference on Working Equines. The conference, entitled 'Better Management, Improved Performance' was organised by the World Association for Transport Animal Welfare and Studies (TAWS) in association with The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust (GHDT). Speakers and experts with experience of working in The Gambia, Mali, Mauretania, Ethiopia, Morocco, Nigeria, Tanzania and Sudan attended for the 2 day seminar and then a field trip to the GHDT head-quarters.



The opening talks set the scene, describing the changing management systems of agriculture in The Gambia and the changing roles of cattle and equines in this sector. Dr Touray (Chairman of the Gambian Vet Council) explained that in the 1930s there were 30,000-40,000 cattle and now there are an estimated 425,000, a reflection of the intensification of cattle farming.

Thirty years ago, horses and donkeys were rare in The Gambia, with oxen providing the majority of the draught power, but now 87,000 cattle and equines are used for this purpose. There are now 25,000 horses and 40,000-50,000 donkeys in The Gambia working

hard helping to plough fields, carry water and other loads on their backs or draw carts. [I nearly said 'pull carts' but one of the first lessons when you start learning about working horses is that they don't 'pull' carts – they 'push' into their harnesses to move the cart. There are fun ways you can show this practically but they don't work so well on paper...]

Introducing equine expertise to the Gambia

The dramatic and relatively rapid increase in the number of equines used in transportation and agriculture in a country with little experience of managing and caring for equines has resulted in welfare problems. Ill-health of the animals can be catastrophic for the farmers dependent on them as they can often only afford a single horse or donkey.



The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust (GHDT) was set up in 2002 with the principle aim of improving the health and welfare of working equines and, in turn, reducing the poverty of their owners. It became apparent to the organisation that although animal health workers were taught extensively about livestock health and management, there was a lack of equine-specific training. The GHDT partnered with The Gambia College School of Agriculture to

address this, and in 2008 and 2009 16 students were selected to be taught additional modules in equine health and management. The extra modules were funded by the GHDT, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) Trust, the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) Trust, the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), and the Donkey Sanctuary.

After the graduation ceremony, the students attended the seminar as professionals to learn from presentations and to participate in the exchange of ideas on the two central themes of management and prevention.

The threat of disease

The GHDT has been working in The Gambia since 2002, and in the eight years of providing basic veterinary support at the nearby markets, they have come across a range of diseases, some of which were previously unknown in The Gambia.

Some highlights from the presentations on disease:

- Some of the diseases are really gruesome. For example, African Horse Sickness (AHS) is caused by a virus spread by midges and causes equines to cough up frothy fluid from nostril and mouth, and fluid buildup in the lungs. It is a highly infectious, distressing and deadly disease. Epizootic lymphangitis is another highly contagious disease; a fungus causes the lymph vessels to stand out, then nodules form along them, which then turn into abscesses exuding copious amounts of pus – gross. Strangles, a disease horse owners in the UK will be familiar with, has emerged as a significant problem. Jamie Gartside presented lots of practical ideas on how this disease can be managed in rural settings as encountered across Africa.
- GHDT had been reporting cases of equines with an unknown neurological disease with a high mortality rate. The horses can be seen to pace restlessly in circles. Laura Peachey (RVC) described research into the cause of the disease – most likely to be cerebral trypanosomiasis. Further work is needed to identify the specific strain involved and to provide appropriate treatment.
- Most projects working with equines in developing countries include a de-worming programme. Chris Proudman (University of Liverpool) explained that research involving people in rural African communities has showed that ‘worms’ are not in the top five concerns to owners with respect to their donkeys and that owners do not recognise the signs of heavy parasite burden. The best way to control worms is the same world-over - a combination of faecal removal and strategic use of de-wormers. He reminded us that 80% of worms are in 20% of the hosts so when you do worm counts it is important to do this for all horses that live together. Faeces collection ‘poo picking’ was highlighted as an excellent method of preventing transmission, and in Africa this has additional economic benefits as faeces can be sold for fuel, fertilizer or even used as barter!
- Between one third and one half of the world’s human population has no access to basic surgery, and for animals access is even less available. However, in his presentation Patrick Pollock (University of Glasgow) described how it is possible to perform many procedures under basic field conditions. Fortunately, many procedures can be done with the equine standing and sedated and with the use of local or regional nerve blocks. Indeed such techniques have several advantages and are therefore ideally suited to areas where standard surgical facilities are not available.
- Another presentation that explored low-tech practical solutions was Alex Thiemann’s (The Donkey Sanctuary) appraisal of traditional solutions for the treatment of wounds and other conditions. Thiemann explained that the majority of the world’s population of working equines is located where access to modern/Western medicines and high-tech diagnostic equipment is limited, either by cost or availability. However, simple remedies and techniques can be effective and also empower local people to use their abilities successfully. Recipes were provided for alternative oral rehydration fluid, pain relief and wound treatments, and Thiemann revealed the secret treatment for donkeys that come to the Donkey Sanctuary with poor appetite and how to reverse hyperlipemia – copious amounts of ReadyBrek! Thiemann explained why some traditional treatments work – for example, sugar paste for wound treatment is an ancient Egyptian/Greek remedy that is still used in parts of Africa- the main action is antibacterial and can be especially useful for infected wounds.

Prevention through education

The need for education of owners to prevent some of these diseases and problems resulting from poor care was an ongoing theme and formed the focus of some of the presentations on the second day.

Some of the presentations had already described how communities can provide useful information about how common diseases are and what the local methods of treatment are. In my presentation I explained how WSPA (The World Society for the Protection of Animals for who I work) has been changing our approach to involve communities also in the solution. Our work to improve the welfare of horses in developing countries used to focus on providing treatment where it would otherwise be unavailable. We funded mobile clinics so that vets could reach the animals in



need. However, this is very expensive, does not reach all the animals who need us and also we used to spend a lot of time patching animals up. We were more interested in really making a difference to the lives of equines, not just in treating their wounds but in making sure their needs, physical and mental well-being, were met. I have been trialling ways of working with communities that depend on working equines for their survival focussing on changing the way they are kept – e.g. through fun activities and discussions considering all the things a horse needs, and nurturing changes in their care. Using examples from my work in Cambodia, Nicaragua, Colombia, Uruguay and The Palestinian Territories I explained what we have learnt about working in this way and shared some of our exciting results. For example, in Cambodia owners have been making their stables much bigger so that the ponies can lie down properly and get proper rest, and in Uruguay incidences of colic decreased by 74% as a result of owners clearing grazing areas of rubbish so preventing horses from eating plastic bags.

Other educational programmes running across Africa were described. For example, Amadou Doumbia (SPANNA) explained that most of the problems faced by working equines in Mali are because of the way they are managed and worked. SPANNA devised training programmes for representatives of groups of owners about how to care for their animals. The results were impressive – in one project area mortality reduced from 62% to 5%, and wound incidence from 42% to 11%, highlighting that education can lead to improved welfare.

Putting theory into practice



The two-day seminar was followed by an optional extension to the GHDT base in the village of Sambel Kunda, 230 km and an 8 hour journey from the comfort of the conference hotel. Here delegates got a taste of how horses and donkeys are kept in rural areas.



There were some practical demonstrations. Ann Varley led a lively session in which some bemused horses and donkeys were painted (it washed off afterwards!) to show their skeletons and then to demonstrate how harness design should enable maximum comfort to the animals and maximum efficiency.



Anyone who thought that learning about cart design would involve donkeys doing the work was in for a surprise as Professor Hovell harnessed people to the carts so that delegates could truly feel the difference between the effects that different designs had on the ease of drawing a cart.

Making a difference

As eloquently summarised by Heather Armstrong (GHDT) “Horse and donkey owners across Africa face significant challenges to keep their animals in good condition to work productively. Some of these challenges can be overcome with simple changes in their management and some challenges are more difficult to deal with. Equines are vital to the economy of the country and they and their owners deserve our support. It is essential that Gambians are taught about how to care and manage these animals and GHDT has been working to achieve this.”

The conference brought together delegates whose work spans many countries in Africa and provided an opportunity to learn from each other and to consider how to best work in often challenging field conditions. The practical demonstrations were particularly memorable and I wouldn't be surprised if a few more horses and donkeys across the world might shortly find themselves being painted!

[Many organisations are working help the equines that work so hard for people all around the world and donations are always welcome. Some examples:

- The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust - <http://www.gambiahorseanddonkey.org.uk/>
- The World Association for Transport Animal Welfare and Studies - <http://www.taws.org/>
- The Donkey Sanctuary (mark donation for overseas work) – <http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk>
- The World Society for the Protection of Animals (<http://www.wspa.org.uk>)]

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