Abstract - Brown

Exploring barriers to welfare improvement - learnings from the working equid context

As animal behaviour and welfare sciences evolve, we are increasingly equipped with methodologies for assessing, and interpreting in welfare terms, the subjective experiences of non-human animals. Similarly, advancements in equine science render us better informed than ever before on application of these concepts to equine species, whose roles, relationships and interactions with humans typically differ from other animal groups. Despite the privilege of unprecedented access to research, resources and services to support equid welfare, evidence-based and welfare-focussed equid management is not yet consistently implemented, raising the question of why practice is not keeping pace with advancement of scientific knowledge.

An estimated 100 million working horses, donkeys and mules globally, predominantly in low-income and resource-poor contexts, are vulnerable to welfare impairment on account of poor knowledge of welfare needs; limited husbandry provisions; high work-loads; harsh living and working environments; and minimal access to professional animal health and welfare services. Accordingly, working equid welfare practitioners - operating at the intersection of animal welfare and international development - face multi-factorial challenges to effecting welfare improvement, be they socio-economic, cultural, educational or geo-political.

However, this complexity necessitates problem-solving, innovation and critical evaluation of prevailing norms, offering scope for valuable learning. Drawing upon experience from the working equid sector, this talk will explore emergent findings of relevance for cross-sectoral or inter-disciplinary application. In particular, themes of welfare issue prioritisation, barriers to effective amelioration and means of overcoming these will be considered.

Whilst specific physical and psychological demands upon equids are subject to contextual variation, their fundamental behavioural and welfare needs are consistent. Thus, regardless of the context, as equid welfare practitioners, advocates, stakeholders or supporters, we share a common objective of optimising welfare within the parameters of our respective constraints.

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