

# Assessing working equid welfare

Subjects: Zoology

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Animal welfare is a multifaceted concept influenced by a variety of factors. As a consequence, its assessment is a complex process that, in order to be successful, must take these factors into account. However, in the past, a focus on biological functioning in welfare evaluations, while neglecting animals' emotional state or consciousness, was commonly seen. For working animals worldwide, understanding the social and cultural context of the role that they fulfil is key to improving their welfare. This is especially pertinent in the case of working equids (donkeys, horses, and mules), which are often overlooked in higher level policy and agricultural interventions. Incorporating insights provided by local perspectives and understanding social networks of information is crucial in ensuring the success of community participation programmes to improve working equid welfare. A more holistic approach to assessing working equid welfare would allow for appraisal, not just of the current welfare state of working equids studied, but also the contextual background needed in order to understand the prevailing influences upon equid welfare within study communities.

Keywords: Welfare Assessment ; Working Equid ; Equid Welfare

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## 1. Introduction

Animal welfare is a multifaceted concept [1] influenced by a variety of factors. As a consequence, its assessment is a complex process that, in order to be successful, must take these factors into account [2]. However, in the past, the focus on biological functioning in welfare evaluations, while neglecting animals' emotional state or consciousness, was commonly seen [3]. The questionnaires accompanying traditional working animal welfare assessments have also typically focused on identifying working and management practices, rather than exploring the social and cultural context in which the animal is found [4].

Resulting from the need for a more holistic approach to welfare, a recent consultation took place to define a One Welfare conceptual framework. Born from, and partially overlapping, the One Health Initiative, One Welfare places emphasis on the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human wellbeing, and the environment [5]. It serves as a platform for interdisciplinary collaboration to improve both human and animal welfare on an international scale. One Welfare's holistic approach considers scientific, ethical, economic, religious, and cultural issues within its framework [6]. For working animals worldwide, understanding the social and cultural context of the role that they fulfil is key to improving their welfare. This is especially pertinent in the case of working equids (donkeys, horses, and mules), which are often overlooked in higher level policy and agricultural interventions [7]. Over 100 million working equids provide vital support for human livelihoods in the developing world [8]. They are relied on for everyday activities, providing access to healthcare, education, and basic necessities in some of the most marginalised communities worldwide, fulfilling a wide range of roles across cultures and environments [7]. In some cases, working equids are people's only source of income. Despite the fact that they are often people's most important asset, welfare standards globally are low. Common welfare problems include insect exposure, poor body condition, lameness, trauma, and dehydration [9].

## 2. Equid welfare assessment

Traditionally, methods of equid welfare assessment have focussed on physical welfare markers and only more recently incorporated behavioural indicators of welfare [10]. Physical markers such as the presence of wounds and lameness are visible manifestations of poor welfare and are widely used as a metric in equid welfare studies [11,12,13]. Body condition scoring is also considered to be an effective welfare metric and is a commonly utilised tool [9,14,15]. For example, studies have successfully demonstrated links between behavioural markers and welfare problems: apathy in equids is associated with the presence of skin lesions, heat stress, poor body condition, and chronic pain [11,16], leading to the recommendation that communities with large numbers of apathetic animals should be considered high priority areas for welfare interventions [11]. Although initial concerns were raised regarding the subjectivity of behavioural markers of

welfare, it has been shown that the measures are consistent and robust [17,18]. Despite these studies, there remains a lack of research into the development of holistic assessments that incorporate social science and human wellbeing, factors that are inextricably tied to animal welfare.

Assessments of working equid welfare must therefore consider the cultural context and the nature of the communities in which they are undertaken. Incorporating insights provided by local perspectives and understanding social networks of information is also crucial in ensuring the success of community participation programmes [19][20]. Research carried out on the implementation of equid welfare initiatives has highlighted the importance of community engagement and participation in order for the initiative to be successful [21]. Equid management and welfare practices are socially transferred information with owners learning from a wide range of sources. Community structure can affect how this information is transferred, with particular individuals influential in the potential acceptance of new practices [22,23]. Although some studies have investigated the most effective methods of transferring welfare information in an educational capacity [23], most research carried out on working equids has focussed on direct indicators of equid welfare and working practices, and the social transfer of this information is an area that has, to date, received relatively little research attention.

In future, a more holistic and standardised approach to assessing working equid welfare, that accounts for the broad range of circumstances that equids encounter in their working lives, is required. This would allow for appraisal and comparison, not just of the current welfare state of working equids studied, but also the contextual background needed in order to understand the prevailing influences upon equid welfare within study communities. Informing understanding of the traditional and cultural practices, social structure and beliefs of the people within equid owning communities would help make initiatives to improve welfare more effective.

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