Improving welfare through education

By the Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust

Throughout the world there are millions of working equines, most of whom are owned by families who themselves are living in poverty. From the Western world it is easy to pass judgement when we are faced with images of sad, emaciated, wounded working animals, and it is all too easy to place the blame on the animal’s owners. However, when you take a step back and look at the bigger picture you view these images in a new light.

Behind almost every animal’s suffering is a family also facing extreme hardship, often without enough money to provide food for their families, and with limited access to medical treatment and basic education. In a world where there is no one to turn to for help when your baby is dying, it is easy to understand why people don’t always ask for help when their animals become unwell. Couple this with very limited veterinary services, high prevalence of tropical disease, food shortages and a high workload, and you begin to understand why some working animals don’t look like the perfect picture of health.

At the Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust although we know that veterinary care is essential, we also have a big focus on education programmes because we believe that prevention is always better than cure. In The Gambia, it is usually the young boys who take care of the family’s animals, so for this reason we set up our School Education Programme in the hope that we can teach the next generation to better understand, respect and love their animals. After all, the working animals are responsible for the wellbeing of the family. If they become weak or unwell they are unable to be productive and, therefore, the family’s income will be dramatically reduced. It is in everyone’s interests to maintain their animals as best they can and this is why it is rarely outright cruelty that causes the equine welfare problems that we see. A healthy animal can increase its owner’s income by 500%, demonstrating that a productive animal results in a healthier family.

Our School Education Programme is designed to be fully interactive and fun for the children. Standing at the front of the class and giving a lecture isn’t something you see us doing too often. You are far more likely to find us outside of the classroom running around or doing role-play games in the classroom. Our donkey suit causes great hilarity amongst the children and our unique teaching styles mean that the children go home remembering the lessons for years to come.

If possible, we use real life equine models for our classes. If the classes are near to our centre we use one of our calm, well-trained long-term residents and, if further afield, we are often able to use one of our Project Donkeys who has been loaned to the school. A donkey pooping on the classroom floor gives all the children something to laugh about (not the teachers quite so much though!).

It became clear very early on that despite the willingness the children had to learn, they had very little understanding of how to correctly handle animals. As a result, we also developed a local Donkey Club for children from nearby villages to attend with their own donkeys to come and learn how to have fun with their animals, whilst learning more about them. Our aim is to help the children to develop not only equine knowledge and handling skills, but also their empathy and compassion.

Our School Education Programme covers a range of topics, including how to recognise a healthy or sick animal, equine needs, correct harnessing, signs of illness, common diseases and injuries in The Gambia, and where and when to get help for a sick animal.

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This project has now been running for six years and we have already seen huge improvements from the children who have taken part in our lessons. At our Annual Horse and Donkey Show, the line-up of animals chosen to win prizes is often made up primarily of donkeys owned by our students, past and present.

The children who were the first to take part in our educational programmes are now responsible teenagers and many of them come back to our centre to help us to teach the younger children. As part of our Donkey Club, the children take part in ‘Donkey Ball’ and the older children still often turn up for training, despite being too large to ride their own donkeys. Instead, they lend their donkeys to younger children and they themselves take the role of umpiring. One of our first students, Cally, is now a valued member of staff at our centre.

By allowing the children to play games with their donkeys, they have developed stronger bonds with their equine partners, realising their potential to have fun together. This has had a direct impact on the health and welfare of these donkeys. One Gambian mother explained to us that her son had asked her to give his donkey food and water whilst he was at school. When he returned from school he was upset to find that this had not been done. When he confronted his mother, she explained that she had forgotten and his response was “This is important. He cannot be left without any food or water. He is an athlete now, and he needs food and water to stay fit and healthy.” Needless to say, she didn’t forget the next time!

When the children’s donkeys become unwell, they now know where to come to get help. There have been numerous incidents where the children have run several kilometres to tell us that their donkey is showing signs of colic, because they now understand how to recognise the symptoms. By teaching the children to be pro-active about their animals’ health, we have been able to save lives that would otherwise have been lost.

Some of our students have sadly lost their donkeys due to tropical disease or colic. In a place where emotions are not usually displayed, especially by young boys, it has been touching to witness their sadness when this has happened. Boys who rarely show their emotions have been beside themselves when their beloved donkeys have passed away, and their friends have supported them and understood their sorrow, rather than teasing them as would have happened previously.

This to me is proof that our educational projects are successful on the deepest level – attitudes are really changing, and there is a real development in compassion and empathy amongst our students. The future for Gambian working equines is definitely starting to look a lot brighter!

The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust welcome short term volunteer vets to assist them with their work. If you are a qualified veterinary surgeon with a minimum of one year’s experience working in practice who would like to offer your help in return for an amazing experience, please send a copy of your CV and covering letter to ghdt@gambiahorseanddonkey.org.uk. Please note that the GHDT are unable to help volunteers financially so volunteers are responsible for all expenses.

Visit www.gambiahorseanddonkey.org.uk to find out how you can help and follow them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/gambiahorseanddonkey.

The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust was established in 2002 by Heather Armstrong and her sister, the Late Stella Brewer Marsden, to improve the health, welfare and productivity of working equines in The Gambia. The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust works in a holistic and sustainable way through a variety of community development and educational programmes that include training of equine professionals, as well as school and farmer education programmes and a twice-weekly ‘Donkey Club’ that local children can attend with their donkeys.