

Working equids in refugee camps

Patrick J Pollock

Refugee camps offer good opportunities for cooperation between humanitarian and animal welfare organisations for the benefit of displaced people and their working animals.

It is estimated that there are over 100 million working equids – horses, donkeys and mules – in parts of the world that are underserved by veterinary care: 55 million horses (84% of the world population), 41 million donkeys (98%) and 13 million mules (96%). These working horses, donkeys and mules provide transport and agricultural energy and in many cases are the sole means of generating income for their owners, many of whom live in poverty. It is estimated that a remarkable 50% of the world's population is reliant on animal power as its main source of energy for agriculture and transport. There are many groups, non-governmental organisations and individuals working to improve the health and welfare of working equids across the globe. This work includes the provision of veterinary care and training for local veterinary surgeons and equid owners. However, to date little is known about the numbers of working equids associated with displaced people and in refugee camps. The 'Humans and animals in refugee camps' project is seeking, among other things, to determine the numbers of working equids travelling with displaced people and to quantify the needs of these animals and the challenges they face.

While healthy, well-managed equids are assets, many owners are too poor to access information about animal care and often live far from any form of veterinary care. This may be particularly the case where people have been displaced, whether to refugee camps, informal settlements or other locations, where their access to veterinary care may be poor or non-existent.

In 2003, approximately 14,000 donkeys carried families displaced by war and natural disaster into the Abu Shouk refugee camp in Darfur, Sudan. Eighteen months later, only around 2,300 were reported to have survived. The Society for the Protection of Animals

Abroad (SPANA) estimated that 84% had died through lack of access to feed. To date few, if any, specific guidelines or protocols have been published to better manage situations such as that reported in Sudan.

In resource-limited settings, animals take second place to humans, which is perhaps how it ought to be. But at Abu Shouk, as veterinarian Tess Sprayson noted, "For want of better collaboration between humanitarian aid and animal welfare agencies, the donkeys died an unnecessary and miserable death, while their owners lost what, in many cases, was their sole means of transport or of earning a living"¹ – a critical lifeline to a future outside the camp. In Darfur, SPANA intervened to provide fodder and basic veterinary care, and the remaining animals in the Abu Shouk camp survived. However, very little data exist on the numbers of working equids used either to travel to or from refugee camps anywhere in the world. Furthermore, little is known about the fate of working equids after their owners have reached a camp.

Since it is recognised that once refugees lose their livestock they are less likely to return home,² it is time to undertake work to determine the scale of animal displacement in order to understand the fate of these animals and to develop frameworks for responding to the presence of working equids. Humanitarian and animal welfare organisations are well suited to working together; they have similar needs, often use similar equipment and have a common interest in 'one health'³ (the collaborative effort of multiple disciplines – working locally, nationally and globally – to attain optimal health for people, animals and the environment). To date there are very few examples of this;^{4,5} however, refugee camps represent a great opportunity for veterinary and animal welfare agencies

to make a difference for the long-term benefit of displaced people and their animals. Co-operation might extend to the development, integration and evaluation of screening tools, shared diagnostic methods, medicines, vaccines, surveillance systems and policies for the prevention, management and control of zoonotic diseases.

With an unprecedented number of displaced people in the world today, it seems logical to assume that the number of affected animals has also increased. The Field Information and Coordination Support Section of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, tracks the number of people forced to flee each year and since equids are readily identifiable, recording their presence and number should be relatively simple. The development of simple screening tools that would allow non-veterinary personnel to flag the presence of equids and other animals in need of

veterinary intervention has the potential to offer considerable welfare benefits for this forgotten population of animals, and for the people that rely so heavily upon them.

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