

Humans and animals in refugee camps

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More research is needed, across disciplines, to better understand the important and varied roles that animals play in the lives of people in refugee camps.

Animals play an important role in human experiences of forced displacement and this is particularly visible in settings of encampment. Camps are often shaped by the need to accommodate animals as well as humans: 'goat barns' and animal markets are a distinctive architectural feature of Sahrawi camps in Algeria, for example.¹ Domesticated animals can play a range of economic and cultural roles in the life of a camp, as camels do in Dadaab, Kenya.² Displaced people's interactions with wild animals can create dangers for both – for example, the semi-formal settlements of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have literally put refugees in the path of elephants.³ Animals may figure in representations of camps, as when journalists mention rats as a shorthand for squalid conditions, and refugees themselves may say they are being treated 'like animals'. Research in this area remains limited, however. In the *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* there are only a few passing references to animals, while in *Forced Migration Review* only one short article has specifically focused on the human–animal relationship.⁴ Practitioner literature highlights the importance of animals to refugees' well-being but focuses mostly on livestock.⁵

This special FMR feature has two aims. First, to highlight for practitioners and policymakers the variety and importance of human–animal interactions in camps, drawing on the experiences of an international team of contributors. Second, to spur further research on the topic, and suggest some of the directions it might take. The feature emerges from a series of meetings, funded by the Wellcome Trust,⁶ between practitioners from organisations including UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), Vets Without Borders, Art Refuge and researchers from disciplines including architecture, history and geography, as well as the

veterinary and medical sciences. A second strand of meetings, with a refugee reference group, is taking place in collaboration with the Scottish Refugee Council.

The project has grown out of my own research on a historical case study: a camp at Baquba, near Baghdad, where occupying British forces at the end of the First World War accommodated nearly 50,000 refugees from Anatolia.⁷ The refugees were accompanied by thousands of animals: large (horses, mules, cattle), smaller (sheep and goats) and tiny (lice). The camp's medical regime for humans started, as they arrived, with the elimination of lice; like the veterinary regime for animals, it also involved close observation, with isolation and treatment of the sick. The animals that arrived with the refugees affected the siting and shape of the camp. British attempts to promote economic activity among the refugees were built around animals, from commercial dairy production with the refugees' own flocks to hiring out teams of human and animal labour – numbering as many as 2,500 men and 1,000 oxen – for waged work outside the camp. Competition over grazing became a key source of friction between refugees and the host population. British plans to close the camp, meanwhile, involved assembling and caring for still more pack and draught animals, both for transporting its human inhabitants and for resettling them more durably elsewhere.

Many of these issues recur in more contemporary cases, as the pieces here show. But they are only a starting point. For a fuller understanding of the roles animals play in the lives of people in refugee camps, research is needed at different scales (from micro to macro) and across many different themes. Veterinary and medical approaches are an obvious place to begin as human health and animal health are intertwined, for example through zoonotic disease (disease which can

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be transmitted from animals to humans). But those connections are not simply biomedical. The art therapy work done in camps in Calais and Nepal by a clinical psychotherapist in our network illustrates how much animals matter in the psychological and emotional health of humans. Precisely **how** they matter will vary: in some places people believe that 'a home without a dog is just a house', while in others a dog in the home would be not just unwelcome but an outrage. The cultural significance of different animals will influence the psychological impact they have – and it will also affect, and be affected by, their role in refugees' social and economic lives. This in turn will inform the ways in which refugees organise (or reorganise) spaces around the needs of their animals, from their own shelters or nearby enclosures to the camp itself and its surrounding landscape. And camps, even urban ones, are always dynamically situated within larger natural environments. As the article by Derek Robertson shows, the environmental factors that contribute to human and animal migration, and shape the experience of migration, are closely connected. This piece, by an artist who has also taken part in scientific studies of migration, indicates the range of different disciplines that can

contribute to our understanding of the subject. We would welcome responses to this initial stage of our own project from practitioners and researchers in any of the many and diverse fields which are of relevance.

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