

The Long Haul

In Tanzania, Humane Society International works with local animal welfarists to improve the treatment of working donkeys

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IT'S THE END OF THE DRY SEASON, hot and dusty, and in Kahama, a rural district in the African nation of Tanzania, most locals are getting ready to plant their crops in anticipation of the coming rains. It's a poor area, and people live simply, in mud or brick homes that typically have a single room and a thatched roof. There's no electricity or running water, and residents use coal-burning stoves to cook their food. Many travel hours daily to sell goods—fruits and vegetables, rice,



In Tanzania, working donkeys who carry goods often have their packs strapped on with ropes that abrade their skin, creating wounds that go untreated. Others are harnessed using yokes designed for oxen, which put pressure on their thin necks.





While vital to the survival of many people in the developing world, donkeys are often not treated very well. Many go unfed and are left to forage what they can, like these animals at a dump in Djenne, Mali.



A major component of TAPO's work involves classroom instruction for donkey owners, during which they learn about donkey care and the provisions of the groundbreaking animal welfare law passed in Tanzania 2008—including the stipulation that working animals must get a certain amount of rest.

Michael George of the Tanzanian Animal Protection Organization demonstrates the new harness system, which puts the primary pressure on the donkey's strong chest rather than his thin neck.

handicrafts—at distant markets. Few have enough money to easily afford shoes, clothes, or medicine; at the local rice plant, piles of dirt and discarded grains are often sifted through by women hoping to find a few leftover pieces of kernel to feed themselves.

Most locals survive by farming, and for farmers—who not only need to till their fields, but also to transport their crops to markets in order to sell them—there are few more important possessions than a good donkey.

"The donkey is the only source of animal power that the poorest can possess and is the only source of income to communities," says Ntanwa Kilagwile, district veterinarian for the Department of Agriculture & Livestock in the Kahama district, which includes more than 200 villages.

In these isolated areas of Tanzania, "rural transport is a vital ingredient for economic growth," says Yohana Kashiilah, founder of the Tanzanian Animal Protection Organization (TAPO). "People and goods have to be moved from place to place, and this arduous task is often provided for by donkeys."

But while many rely on donkeys to eke out a living, the animals usually aren't treated very well. In Kahama and many other parts of Africa, it's common to see working donkeys wearing yokes that were made for oxen and were designed with an ox's unique neck muscles in mind. Donkeys' bodies are shaped differently, and without adjustments to the harnessing system, these yokes put the weight of the load on their long, thin necks, inflicting severe strain, injury, and sores.

Kashiilah says that the use of oxen carts and single-shaft carts without harnessing systems—along with beatings by uneducated or cruel owners—are the main contributors to the

donkeys' suffering. In addition, the packs strapped to donkeys' backs are tied in such a way that they often interfere with breathing, and they're made of materials—such as rope and discarded rice satchels—that are rough and chafe against the donkeys' skin, creating wounds on their backs, rears, and necks. Because of the lack of accessible veterinary care, the results are sometimes fatal and generally inhumane.

Signs of Hope

But there are signs of hope for donkeys in Tanzania. In 2008, the country passed the Tanzania Animal Welfare Act—a landmark step in Africa, where there are few laws protecting animals. Among other elements, the law contains provisions for the keeping of livestock and rules for the care of working animals. Enforcement will fall under district veterinarians, who are tasked with overseeing scores and sometimes hundreds of villages—a fact that makes community buy-in crucial.

In Kahama, TAPO has sought to engage the community directly, taking on the mistreatment of donkeys through humane education and by involving local artisans in the creation of a harness better suited to equine anatomy. It's an approach that will benefit the animals, donkey owners, and local craftsmen, says Kashiilah. "The goal," he says, "is to change the image of the donkey in peoples' minds as an object and become an investment for poverty reduction through availability of proper harnessing materials within the district."

As part of our donkey welfare initiative, Humane Society International (HSI)—the global affiliate of The Humane Society of the United States—has been providing funding for TAPO's fieldwork and educational programs. In my role

OPPOSITE PAGE: KIRSZ MARCINI/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM LEFT: KELLY COLADARCI/HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL RIGHT: TANZANIAN ANIMAL PROTECTION ORGANIZATION



Kelly Coladarci of Humane Society International assists Michael George (front) and Ntanwa Kilagwile in treating a severe wound caused by the rough rope of a donkey pack.

as program manager for HSI, in December 2010, I traveled to Tanzania to help out on the ground with animal care and field surgery and to see TAPO's work firsthand.

At the first village we went to, Mwenda Kulima (which translates to "people that farm"), I met the TAPO team, including Kashililah, TAPO's founder, and Kilagwile, a recent graduate of the only veterinary school in Tanzania, who now serves as the lead and only vet for the district department of agriculture and livestock. I also met TAPO's three passionate educators, all of whom live in Kahama. Michael K. George—or Master Michael, as he is known—is a paravet who works very closely with Kilagwile on the direct care component of the program. And Juma Mwesigwa and Jonas Charles are teachers at a nearby school who are also involved with other community programs focusing on children's nutrition and education.

A committed animal advocate, Kashililah began TAPO's efforts in the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam, but has since expanded. When I asked him why he started the Kahama program, he said it was because the district has so many donkeys in such bad shape, and that neither the government nor other animal welfare groups were taking action to help.

It's not usually a matter of deliberate cruelty, according to Kashililah. Many locals, he says, "have no time or resources to cope with the needs of their animals after they have cared for their families as best as their resources allow." But the reality of widespread poverty, in combination with

the widely held belief that donkeys are inherently stubborn and must be beaten in order to work, can make for a terrible situation for the animals. A donkey who's well cared for has a life expectancy of 40 years, but according to Kilagwile, in the Kahama district they typically live only 12 to 14.

Such a brief lifespan is common in many developing countries, where donkeys are often crucial to human survival, performing vital hauling and farming tasks—and yet, paradoxically, their usefulness is no guarantee they'll be treated kindly.

Used to transport goods and in agricultural roles such as plowing, donkeys often haul handmade, overloaded packs and sport ill-fitting harnesses, and their health and welfare is largely disregarded. But because they don't produce meat or milk, people view them as having little worth, and thus provide only minimal care. The animals have little access to water, and may only feed on whatever grass or garbage they can find. In Kahama, those lucky enough to own donkeys often rent them to others in the "off hours," which can mean that the animals work almost ceaselessly.

Acting Locally

TAPO is working to change that with its public outreach and educational programs. To be effective, the group works within the framework of local customs, first sending an official government letter explaining the program to the village executive officer (VEO) in each town, who will be the project ambassador for the lifetime of the project there.

The VEO then encourages residents to attend the upcoming workshop. The VEO's other responsibilities include program follow-up and enforcement of the orders set forth in the new legislation, such as working hours for donkeys.

This approach is necessary due to local cultural norms, Kilagwile explains. In Tanzania, there is a chain of information flow from district level to village level, so any information from the district to the community must pass to the local leaders. This is encouraging as it provides close follow-up of the program by village leaders as well as enforcement of the new animal welfare legislation. Community pressure to enforce the new law is essential, because a single district veterinarian cannot patrol the 200-plus villages in the region.

Part of what makes the TAPO approach effective is that the group does not tell locals to cease using the oxen yoke—at least, not yet. Instead, as an interim measure, the group has enlisted local artisans, who have designed a donkey harness that can be used in conjunction with the yokes. This harness is attached to an oxen yoke, thus maintaining the yoke's hauling benefits but eliminating the stress created when the yokes are placed directly onto donkeys' necks.

The harness features a breast band that allows the animals to pull from their chests, which are much stronger than their necks. The breast band is broad enough to ensure a large surface area of contact, and the inside surface—the part that touches the animal's skin—is made of softer, smoother nylon. The harness also includes a back strap, head collar, girth, and breech strap which cover the sensitive areas, eliminating the rope-burn factor the animals have often endured. As funding becomes available, TAPO plans to help locals modify their carts, gradually eliminating the need to use an oxen yoke at all.

Getting people to adopt a new technology always takes education, and Kahama is no exception. TAPO is educating donkey owners, but also trying to teach educators themselves: Along with the workshops for villagers, the district's educational department recently selected 48 primary school teachers from various regions to take part in the workshops. All materials are presented in the participants' native language, Swahili.

Animal welfare is not typically included in the curriculum in Tanzania, so TAPO has identified these teachers as leaders within their schools and communities, in the hope that they'll help introduce animal welfare in the schools. The teachers learn, and are then encouraged to share their knowledge and apply these materials to their school syllabi upon returning home, and to form school clubs to disseminate information. Because children are frequently involved in caring for the family's animals, it's imperative that education be started in primary school so that they'll learn compassionate, effective ownership at an early age, and can go on to spread those values as they grow up.

Show and Tell

The workshops typically begin with classroom instruction covering basic donkey care, including essential husbandry, basic

medical care, shelter requirements, harnessing, and humane training. At the sessions I attended, Kilagwile talked about the Tanzania Animal Welfare Act, including its stipulation that it is illegal to work a donkey outside of allotted timeframes; the new legislation requires rest periods for the animals. He talked about the role and responsibility of animal owners and the care necessities of all living beings. Michael and Juma provided training on basic donkey behavior.

Once village participants had gone through the classroom session, the organizers performed a hands-on demonstration of the principles they had discussed, using the attendees' own donkeys to show facets of care and handling. Kilagwile and Michael also administered deworming medication, vitamins, and antibiotics as needed.

In the sessions I attended, almost all the owners had donkeys in need of wound care for painful pressure sores, and every donkey had lesions along the ridges of their backs from the use of overloaded and improper packs.

The hands-on session of the workshop involves the animals themselves, and while I was there, it drew curious onlookers. During our session, the local children stayed close enough to watch, but far enough away not to be in the way. They stared at every procedure, whether it was an injection, wound cleaning, or localized surgery. They were with their friends, wide-eyed and giggling through all of the interaction.

In the brief time I was in Kahama, I saw signs of hope at the workshops, where a donkey owner said he had learned a lot and appreciated the materials he'd been given on care and appropriate rest. I noticed, too, that workshop attendees touched and talked to their donkeys more often after seeing TAPO's leaders demonstrate these behaviors. And on the street, we saw two children using the new harness-and-cart system with their own donkey. They had attended a previous workshop and, while nervous about the attention, seemed shyly proud about the praise we gave them.

Kilagwile thinks that the workshops and the involvement of local artisans is an approach that makes sense. "I see this program having long-term effects because of the current importance of donkeys to the community," he says.

Indeed, while a utilitarian attitude toward animals often creates welfare issues, in those places where the interests of the owners and the animals overlap, there's great potential for change. Through the efforts of groups like TAPO, we can make a lasting impact on the care of a group of animals who, although they can be found in most every country around the world, tend to be commonly overlooked in animal welfare efforts. 🐾

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