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.
help for working donkeys

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.
help for working donkeys

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 Kashillah, 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.

Kashillah 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 Kashillah. “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...
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.
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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