

Working Equid Welfare

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The term 'equid' refers to the taxonomic family *Equidae* which includes Horses, Donkeys and Mules. There are roughly 116 million equids across the world, 99% of the world's Donkey population resides in low or middle income countries (BROOKE, 2022). These figures are only estimates as many countries do not document their equid populations, which makes it increasingly difficult to assess welfare impacts of working equids.



Working equids are frequently used for purposes such as tourism and transportation of heavy loads. They often work in adverse conditions with little to no access to appropriate diets, water and proper veterinary care. They are also frequently used in unregulated and dangerous industries such as coal mining and brick kilns. These industries exploit both people and equids, they are expected to complete numerous trips carrying heavy and uneven loads whilst being exposed to disease, heat stress and exhaustion (BROOKE, 2021). Individuals who live within lower income countries often rely on the use of working equids to earn money, they face poverty and instability which has a direct impact on the welfare of their animals. With limited resources and significant lack of income opportunities, many have no choice but to utilise these animals even if the work has negative consequences (Raw, Collins and Burden, 2024).



Hard labour, lack of water, no rest ...

Organisations such as BROOKE (Action for working Horses and Donkeys) and SPANA (The Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad) conduct critical research and projects that aim to improve the welfare of working equids as well as educating animal owners on good care practices. They also advocate and promote better regulation and protection for both working equids and individuals in lower and middle income countries with the goal of improving standards of welfare.

Working equids are commonly seen within the tourism industry. Many Greek islands are built on steep and uneven terrain meaning often the only transport available is the Donkeys. They are used to transport visitors, luggage and other goods needed around the islands. In the UK, Donkeys have been a common site on beaches around the country offering Donkey rides to tourists. Equids are also used for carriage rides in many countries around the world.

The tourism industry benefits greatly from the use of equids, but this benefit is to the people and not the animal. Common injuries seen in working equids include, lameness, hoof damage, musculoskeletal problems, colic and infection (Benedetti *et al.*, 2024). These injuries are not extensive but they are often caused by lack of veterinary care, overloading, improper or ill fitting tack and lack of hoof care. This suffering is not only preventable, it often leads to fatalities that could be avoided.

It is not just low or middle income countries where these cases occur. New York City famously offer horse carriage rides around the city. Having seen this first hand it is clear these horses were not receiving the highest standards of care. These horses are expected to work for long hours without access to food and water, as well as having to work in the centre of one of the busiest cities in the world. They are housed in multi-storey stalls around the city which are completely unsuitable environments for them and the buildings themselves are run down and appear abandoned.

There have been campaigns and opposition against the use of carriage horses in New York City. After a carriage horse named Ryder collapsed and died in 2022, Ryder's law was proposed to see a phased out end of carriage horses by 2026 (The New York City Council, 2024) and having them replaced with electric alternatives for drivers to use instead. Unfortunately this bill has been delayed as it was not advanced further, however campaigners continue to advocate for its introduction.

In the UK, horses in the police are used for riot/crowd control, high visibility presence and ceremonial duties. They are used as a tactical advantage for officers to have better visibility, ability to cover terrain not able to by vehicles and it is also claimed that the presence of horses provide reassurance for the public. There are concerning welfare issues for these horses as they are exposed to violent and volatile environments without the ability to escape or cope with this. This exposure can cause lasting psychological damage.

Equids are highly social animals who need to forage for 16-18 hours per day, they require ability to freely move and of course, rest too. As prey species they exhibit vigilance and flight behaviours when presented with something they perceive to be dangerous. Even one single negative event can have a lasting impact on the physiological or psychological state of an equid, in turn, compromising their welfare (ICWE, 2025). The use of working equids negatively impacts their welfare and takes away their ability to choose how they react and behave in unfamiliar environments. To conclude I will ask you this, just because we *can* use these animals, does it mean we *should*?

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