

**TAWS OVERSEAS TRAVEL GRANT PROJECT REPORT 2009  
INDIA MARTIN - EGYPT****Homar/ge to Egypt**

*(homar Arabic word for donkey)*

Egypt, like so many African countries, boasts that happy chaos resulting from people gaining the use of cars and technology before the country has the sense and infrastructure to control them. One can't help but be awed at each glimpse of the pyramids snatched through this hubbub.



It amazes me how once upon a time a construction requiring such organization and planning happened in a city that still has not mastered the traffic light. It comes as no surprise that the humble donkey still plays such an important role in the deep internal workings of this country providing, through back-breaking labour, the bricks with which the city is built and the food the people eat, a noble burden indeed.

Armed with an ophthalmoscope, scarf and questionnaire, and not forgetting a little/lot of help from a friend called the Donkey Sanctuary and the BVA TAWS grant I was ready to take on Egypt! The Egyptian Branch of Donkey Sanctuary is a marvelous organization that reaches out to the poorest people, providing help where I feel it is needed most.



The team consists of three mobile clinics that operate out of the back of pickup trucks. Each clinic consists of a vet, a harness maker, an education officer and a driver, and their main aim is to create sustainable projects in each community.

This is achieved through the teaching and training of local people ranging from the donkeys' owners to the farriers, harness makers and an appointed animal health technician who remains a representative of the Sanctuary in that area. As the respect for the organization grows within the community and the owners gain a better understanding of the needs of their animals, the vets find that there is less work for them to do and less supervision is required.

Much of their routine work can subsequently be dealt with by the animal technician allowing the vets to cover a larger area.

At present the teams try to return to sites on a regular weekly or fortnightly basis, however they are considering reducing this in areas where they are well established since they have seen great improvements in the donkeys' general welfare.



If this level of self-sufficiency can spread to new locations with equal success the overall welfare of donkeys will improve dramatically.

In my time there I began to understand the importance of vets as teachers and how much can be achieved simply by raising people's awareness. Education, therefore, forms a key part of the work of the organization. One way I felt they could improve their work would be through the appointment of a female education officer.

Women are often the ones involved in looking after the donkeys and would be much more at ease discussing their animals and asking questions of a fellow woman. Women also have a major role in educating the children and so provide another channel for passing on important messages.



Whilst working there I was constantly asked my opinion regarding the best way to treat certain conditions and what advice I would give to the owners.

I found this very difficult being only a student and not having great confidence in my judgment due to my minimal amount of field experience over textbook knowledge. I have returned to the UK with many veterinary questions and with the promise to pass on any words of wisdom gained.

This is an important point to grasp in that coming from the UK we have such a wealth of information at our fingertips, but this is far from the case in Egypt. Information is very precious and much sought after. My experience there has made me appreciate how spoilt we are for resources and not just of the equipment and drugs variety.

For this reason any keen ophthalmologists or vets with good working knowledge that could be applied to donkeys, please get in touch with me since I know a number of vets in Egypt who would love the opportunity to discuss some clinical cases.



My reason for visiting Egypt was to establish a baseline of ocular health in the donkeys attending the clinics. The questionnaire I designed was very simple, relying heavily on information that could be gained visually so as not to interfere with the work of the vets and not requiring a strong grasp of Arabic.

It consisted of a brief welfare exam followed by a more detailed ocular exam. I based my questionnaire around previous models used by the Brooke and the Donkey Sanctuary.

Egyptian donkeys are known to suffer from habronema larvae infection of the lacrimal ducts, resulting in epithora leading to lesions on the face.

This moisture attracts flies bringing infection and exacerbating the condition. During my survey I became aware of the large number of donkeys suffering from a small degree of epithora, which was not the result of blocked tear ducts that flushed fine on examination.



It seemed that the environment that the donkeys work and live in is very dusty which may result in a low-grade keratitis causing increased lacrimation.

Once back in the UK, I found myself at 7 am on Boxing Day morning in A&E with a towel over my head suffering terribly from a sudden and very painful case of what can only be described as keratitis having spent a night in a smoky room.

I had a strong feeling that the donkey god was trying to tell me something. Although my eyes looked relatively normal, the only clue to my discomfort was teary eyes and an aversion to light. This most certainly seemed to ring a bell.

Although I found my time there extremely interesting, it was difficult to gain as much information as I had anticipated. My number of working days was severely eaten into by the feast of Eid el Adha where the whole country grinds to a merry (with the exception of sheep)

standstill and a grueling case of viral enteritis that kept me bed ridden and feverish. However my trip highlighted the importance of conducting studies, and not just for the advancement of knowledge. Simply the processes of looking at the donkeys' eyes made the locals inquisitive and consider eye conditions as being something a vet can examine and treat in the same way they look at sores and lameness. An eye opener one might say!

Whilst talking with the vets about my concern over the amount of data I had collected it became clear that more valid information could be gained if the questionnaire was conducted at intervals over the year to look for seasonal variations. I therefore set about making adjustments and improvements to the questionnaire with the help of Dr Mohsan, one of the vets with a keen interest in ophthalmology. He has agreed to stay in touch continue the work. I hope I shall be able to return next year to help finish what I have started and analyze the data collected.



I felt extremely welcome amongst the team and was constantly battling to stop them from overly putting themselves out to help me.

They, however, made full use of the novelty of a foreign vet student, which resulted in many extra invites for tea with the owners of brick kilns and farmers. It took me a while to realize the benefits of these exchanges.

Initially I had apprehensions of wasting their time, but as I started to better understand the culture I later discovered that the best way to make any changes in Egypt is to sit down have tea and talk about it, so it seems a great deal of progress in improving the welfare of donkeys can be achieved over a glass of chai! I feel this is very important lesson regarding work abroad.

One must understand and respect the culture and not barge in with all our western ideals. Change will not happen if people are offended, undermined and bullied.

As for Egypt I have found a new love. Its government and infrastructure may be interesting, but it is a beautiful land with charming people who haven't forgotten the importance of friendship and family in this work driven world.

Never refuse a cup of 'Chai'. This is an important life lesson for me. I shall definitely return to this fascinating land, but in the meantime must learn Arabic!

