

## **“Hard work never did a donkey any good!”**

A famous Ethiopian saying in which a donkey refers to a stupid person but quite apt for my purposes I felt when I first heard it during on the 12 hour plane journey to one of the most breath taking countries in the world-Ethiopia.

I was in Addis Ababa to carry out my elective project on the prevalence of lameness in donkeys in urban and rural Ethiopia. Why donkeys? Ethiopia has the second largest donkey population in the world after China, the latest estimation being 5.2million. Donkeys form an integral part of the transport system and are intimately linked to the make up of social and trade structures within Ethiopian society. There is also a lot written about donkeys role in the emancipation of women in East Africa-not the first thing you'd credit a donkey with but another Ethiopian saying says that “if a donkey can't carry it then my wife will have too”. The Donkey Sanctuary, a Devon based charity funds a large clinic in a town just south of Addis complete with an operating theatre, in patient facilities, radiography equipment and a laboratory. The clinic forms part of the veterinary faculty at the University of Addis. It is manned by Ethiopian vets and animal health assistants who are experts in donkey medicine and surgery and have an unbelievable enthusiasm for there subject which is most definitely contagious.

My original plan had been to be based in the Merkato market in Addis where on market days up to 2000 donkeys come to bring grain from the peri-urban areas. The Donkey Sanctuary is planning to put a permanent clinic in this market so information about the donkeys there is very important. However the donkeys of Ethiopia are a diverse bunch leading very different lives in the city than in the rural areas and so it became obvious that to make my research as valuable as possible a comparison of lameness in the rural and urban populations was the best approach. This was very much supported by the vets at the clinic and was brilliant for me as I got to join their animal health teams visiting rural areas three times a week-an unforgettable experience. We travelled for a couple of hours a day down dirt tracks in a land rover, bumpy though it was it gave me the opportunity to see some of the most beautiful scenery Ethiopia has to offer including the rift valley and Entoto hills. After miles of farm land being ploughed by boys and men with their oxen we would arrive at our destination, usually a market or central meeting place for the people in an area often spanning a 50km area. Donkeys are everywhere in Ethiopia and wherever we stopped our vehicle we would be surrounded by donkey owners eager to get their donkeys treated or de-wormed. In some areas

where the donkey sanctuary has only just started working there is some scepticism among the local people but more often than not the people are desperate to get treatment for their donkeys. Donkeys are used to transport everything in rural areas where there are no vehicles to speak of, they transport the farmers produce to and from market, carry water from rivers of water points and carry wood from the forests. All the treatment given by the Donkey Sanctuary is free of charge.

Clinical problems ranged from back sores caused by carrying loads without sufficient protective padding to colic and more exotic diseases such as histoplasmosis, rabies, babesia, anthrax and parasitic infection. One of the vets said to me on my first day, “if there’s a disease you want to see come to Ethiopia-we have them all”, not a great advert for tourism but an invaluable experience for any vet or student. If cases is what you want you’ll get them here. The team treats over 100 donkeys in every visit and this is a relatively quiet time as the farmers are very busy with ploughing, in the summer months the mobile clinic can treat over 500 donkeys in one visit to a site. As well as treating clinical cases the clinic also runs a de-worming programme using Ivermectin at the beginning and end of the rainy system, this seems to work very well and the owners are always very enthusiastic about having their donkeys de-wormed as they can see the dramatic effects it has on their food conversion rate.



The most serious cases would be asked to come to the clinic in Debre Zeit to be kept as in patients, the clinic has a small trailer to transport those from distant areas. The mobile clinic carries the usual set of equine drugs, including phenylbutazone, penstrep, TMPS granules etc and equipment such as stomach tubes, tooth rasps, hoof knives and basic surgical equipment for stitch ups. In fact the majority of clinical problems can be treated at the mobile clinic but unfortunately treatment is often limited because follow up visits are not possible unless they are close to Debre Zeit, on the other hand several times we saw donkeys who had been treated the previous month and who’s wounds were healing well as there owners had followed the recommended washing and application of zinc oxide cream. Wounds are

treated in a variety of ways, the best of which still remains a matter of personal preference and individual circumstances but prevention is always encouraged. The vets and animal health workers encourage owners to make simple therapeutic saddles which are padded with straw and have on them a raised doughnut shaped ring which goes over the back sore so that they can continue to work while the sore is healing, rest is not an option if a family has only one donkey. The vets have to treat an animal in such a way as to facilitate its ability to work; this can often lead to difficult ethical dilemmas when faced with donkeys that are so severely injured or sick that they would be euthanized in the UK.



In contrast to these rural areas Merkato was a bit of a shock to the system, the largest market in east Africa, Merkato is a phenomenal sight; some Ethiopians say you can buy anything you could possibly want here except maybe life itself. We went to the grain area where trucks bring in the grain which is then bought by merchants who transport it on donkeys to the areas surrounding Addis to sell to local merchants or individuals who will then use their donkeys to take it to their homes. These could be described as the hardest working donkeys in Ethiopia, they walk up to 10km in the morning to get to the market, stand for long periods of time in the heat, are loaded with up to 200kg of grain and then walk to many different areas to deliver it having to walk on roads or stony paths at a fast pace with little or no rest. Needless to say some of them are in bad shape with lameness being a major problem caused in many cases by road traffic accidents which leave the donkeys with seriously deformed hooves.

My time with the donkey sanctuary clinic in Ethiopia was a truly invaluable experience both for my veterinary education and personally. It gave me an insight into development veterinary medicine in which there are so many factors to consider. The social impact of my chosen career has never been so clearly demonstrated.