BVA/TAWS Grant Project 2008

Prevalence and aetiology of eye lesions in working equids, and an assessment of their perceived welfare impact

The aim of this study was to document the prevalence of eye lesions in working equids in the Had Ouled Frej area of Morocco, to ascertain the aetiology of these lesions and to assess the owners perception of the impact of these lesions on their animals welfare. The study was carried out over a four week period at the SPANA (Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad) Had Ouled Frej clinic. SPANA is a charity operating internationally, with 11 clinics around Morocco catering to working equines. Had Ouled Frej is a small rural village in the North of Morocco, about 1 hour from the famous port town of El Jadida.

The souk at Had Ouled Frej, showing typical working equids
All hospitalised in patients were examined and a selection of animals entering the clinic for consultations. All subjects received a full ophthalmological examination, and then a series of questions about husbandry and the health of the animal were posed, in order to assess variables that may act as risk factors for eye lesions. If a lesion was found, another questionnaire was used to gauge the owner's perception of the welfare impact of the problem. In total 9 animals were found to have ophthalmological abnormalities.

An animal which presented with bilateral epiphora, and was found to have bilateral blockage of the nasolacrimal ducts.
The majority of these lesions were due to trauma, with 5 out of the 9 problems originally due to a traumatic event. 44% of all animals in the study population were found to have some sort of ocular discharge, but only 6% of these were classified as significant as greater than grade 2 on a linear scoring method. 67% of the owners of animals with lesions had already noted the lesions, and of these only 1 did not classify the lesion as significantly uncomfortable for the animal. Due to the small sample size and small number of animals with lesions it was decided not to analyse the significance of risk factors.

Torn corpora nigra and corneal opacities in an animal with a previous history of trauma induced acute uveitis
Conclusions from this study are that there is a relatively high prevalence rate of eye lesions in Morocco, at 18% in the animals observed, but the true prevalence of eye lesions may have been underestimated due to problems such as the small sample size, the sampling population and poor examination facilities. Owners appear concerned about the ocular health and welfare of their animals, but they often delayed or failed to obtain treatment for the problems, which in one case led to blindness in an animal. Owners should be educated about the potential seriousness of eye lesions on the long term health of their animals and their overall welfare, and encouraged to pursue treatment as soon as possible.

A typical customer, seen here at the worming campaign which is held outside the clinic every three months.
I found my time in Morocco extremely enjoyable and educational, there were definitely some very sad cases but it was great to be able to help treat animals whose owners would not be able to afford any veterinary treatment without the help of SPANA. I found the people hospitable and friendly, and very grateful. Some examples include the owner who brought me eggs in thanks for treating her horse for colic, and the owner who sought me out in the village whilst I was eating in a street 'restaurant', much to the amusement of the rest of the customers. The SPANA Had Ouled Frej team were wonderful and I have made some lifelong friends. The experience has made me much more confident and improved my diagnostic and practical skills ready for work in the 'real world' in England!
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Me 'driving' the donkey cart!