

Utilisation of donkeys in southern Ghana

by

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Abstract

Donkey utilisation in southern Ghana was examined from the standpoint of activities of the Animal Traction Project whose aims include the introduction of donkeys into the south of the country. Extension activities such as demonstrations and training resulted in increased utilisation of donkeys as evidenced by the rise in the number of donkeys sold each year. The project sold 101 donkeys, of which 49% were used for carting refuse. Donkeys were also sold for carting and tillage on farms (27%), meat for human and pet use (8%) and transporting materials at construction and industrial sites (6%). Despite the advantage motorised vehicles have over donkeys with regards to speed, donkeys were preferred by small-scale operators for economic reasons. It was concluded that with more education on the benefits of using donkeys, more people will adopt them for draft purposes.

Introduction

Traditionally the use of donkeys in Ghana has been confined to the Upper East Region where they are primarily used to cart firewood, water and goods to and from markets. In recent years donkeys have been introduced to the southern parts of the country. This is line with the general trend occurring in the West African sub-region as reported by Starkey (1994).

The Animal Traction Project of the University of Ghana's Agricultural Research Station has been actively involved in introducing donkeys to the south of the country for a variety of purposes in the past ten years. There has been little documentation of the activities of the Animal Traction Project in popularising and improving the utilisation of donkeys in Ghana. For example, Starkey (1994) hardly mentioned the donkey situation in Ghana. This paper, therefore, reports on the activities of the Animal Traction Project, and its influence on donkey utilisation in Ghana.

Background information

Two herds of donkeys are kept by the Animal Traction Project. The breeding herd normally

consists of an entire male and approximately 20 females. This herd was constituted initially by buying donkeys from the Upper East Region to add to the few already present on the station. Offspring of the breeding animals are transferred to the commercial herd after weaning.

The commercial herd is maintained as a pool from which donkeys are sold to potential users. It is composed of offspring from the breeding herd and occasional bought-in animals from the northern parts of Ghana. In the majority of cases donkeys sold from the commercial herd are trained for carting and sometimes also for tillage work. A two-wheel donkey cart and three-pad collar harness are sold along with each donkey purchased. Training is offered on the station to all those who buy donkeys.

Results and discussion

Records of the sale of donkeys by the Animal Traction Project were examined, as were details of the training given to buyers. Staff on the project were interviewed. Table 1 shows the trends in the sale of donkeys and in the number of personnel trained.

The only donkey buyer in the first two years was the Waste Management Department of the Accra Metropolitan Authority. The Authority's interest in the Project was stimulated through a donation of two donkeys and carts to be used in collecting refuse from parts of the city where it was uneconomical to run big refuse trucks from house to house. This initiative was successful and the Authority decided to pay for two additional donkeys and carts. The Waste Management Department subsequently developed a cooperation with the Project to promote the use of donkeys for removal of refuse from households to a central dump. In the period 1988–91 half the donkeys sold were for refuse collection. In the succeeding years, sales of donkeys generally increased as did the number of people trained by the Project. This period coincided with privatisation of refuse collection, and individuals bought donkeys to

Table 1: Donkeys sold and personnel trained in donkey use by the Animal Traction Project (1986-1996)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Donkeys sold</i>	<i>Personnel trained</i>
1986	2	2
1987	2	2
1988	7	-
1989	8	7
1990	7	-
1991	16	2
1992	5	25
1993	11	20
1994	9	15
1995 ¹	18	32
1996 ¹	16	32
Total	101	137

¹The figures for 1995 and 1996 include 64 people trained with sponsorship from the 'Bread for the World' livestock training programme.

continue what the Waste Management Department had started.

In 1992 there were many requests for donkeys but these could not be met because the commercial herd could not be replenished as quickly as donkeys were being sold from it. As a result of extension activities, some donkeys were purchased by users directly from the Upper East Region.

Table 2 shows the reasons for which clients bought donkeys from the Project.

Buying donkeys for refuse disposal (49 out of 101) accounted for half of the sales made during the ten year period under review. As stated earlier, house to house refuse collection was privatised in 1989. Individuals were encouraged to buy donkeys and carts for refuse removal. Two individuals were very successful in making profits from refuse collection and plan to buy more donkeys to expand their coverage. Clients buying donkeys for refuse collection were not limited to the Accra area. Eight donkeys were sold to other regions for the same purpose, due to the work of the Project with people from outside Accra.

The use of donkeys for agricultural purposes has involved carting farm produce alone or both carting and tillage work. Relatively few donkeys

Table 2: Reasons for purchase of donkeys from the Animal Traction Project (1986-1996)

<i>Reason for purchase</i>	<i>Number purchased</i>
Refuse collection	49
Carting and tillage on farm	27
Meat	8
Carting farm produce	7
Carting building materials	6
Pet/recreational	2
Driving a shaft	1
Carting water	1
Total	101

(7) were bought for the sole purpose of carting farm produce. The main farm produce in this context was pineapples for export. A number of small farm projects especially in the Volta Region were encouraged to buy donkeys (27) together with a cart and plow, because of their relative low cost compared to bullocks.

Some donkeys were slaughtered for meat. The Animal Traction Project had not envisaged this, but old animals found a ready market as meat for human consumption. Donkey meat is not widely eaten in Ghana but it is a delicacy for some of the people indigenous to the Upper East Region where most of Ghana's donkeys are found. Sizeable migrant populations of these people exist in a number of southern towns. They therefore represent a market for culled donkeys. Many requests to use culled donkeys for pet food were also received by the Project.

Factors influencing adoption

A number of factors have contributed to the increased awareness about the use of donkeys and hence the increase in demand and in the number of animals sold. These included demonstrations of animal traction methods at shows, training programmes for a wide range of learners and modifications to equipment making it more appropriate for use with donkeys.

A ten month farmers' training programme sponsored by the Leventis Foundation has a course on animal traction in which trainees are allowed to do an apprenticeship for seven out of the ten months training. It was observed that about

50% of past trainees who opted for animal traction were practising one form or another of animal traction technology. In 1994, one trainee invested in a donkey and cart to transport water from a nearby dam for dry season vegetable farming. This trainee's obvious success should help to promote animal traction.

Since the inception of the Animal Traction Project, agricultural students of the University of Ghana have received first hand experience of animal traction methods during their practical training on the station. These students are potential extension officers. Serving extension officers have also trained with the Project. These trainees constitute a pool of skilled animal traction advisers who may positively influence farmers' decisions to use donkeys in the future.

Bread for the World (an NGO) sponsored the training of 64 people in the use of animal traction during 1995 and 1996. The target groups were church organisations involved in farming.

Interviews with Project staff revealed that as a result of their extension activities some donkeys were purchased by users directly from the Upper East Region. Therefore, the volume of sales recorded at the Project probably understates the extent to which the project has influenced donkey utilisation in the southern sector of Ghana.

The Project has also introduced three-pad collar harnesses and a four-wheel donkey cart. Before the Animal Traction Project, donkeys in Ghana were generally harnessed with discarded bicycle tyres or turns of nylon ropes covered with rags (illustrated by Fielding, 1987). These harnesses caused abrasions and rested on the trachea of the donkey if it went uphill with a load (Canacoo, 1991). To solve this problem the Project copied (with some modifications to reduce cost) a three pad collar harness from the University of Nairobi. This was successfully tested on a few donkeys and was subsequently popularised among donkey users. Introduction of the three pad collar harness enabled hitching of two donkeys to a cart to provide more haulage force. Hitherto, this had not been done in Ghana. With an efficient harness in place and the possibility of pairs of donkeys, a four-wheeled donkey cart was developed. This has the advantage of being able to carry a larger load.

Problems and issues in utilisation

Donkeys are not the only technology for refuse collection. Some people have used power tillers to pull trailers into which garbage is heaped. The

slow speed of the donkey does not favour competition with such motorised vehicles. Using donkeys in the inner city also obstructs traffic. However, the use of donkeys must still be encouraged because it is more economical for small scale operators and more appropriate in areas where access to houses by motorised vehicles is difficult.

The economic advantages are illustrated by the experience of one person. A man initially bought three donkeys with carts for refuse collection. He made enough money from the venture to buy two second-hand power tillers to enable him to expand his area of coverage. About a year later he abandoned the power tillers to go back to donkeys because the operational and maintenance costs for the power-tillers became too high.

Follow-up extension by the Animal Traction Project has been minimal, especially for users outside Accra. This situation has resulted in the perpetuation of initial mistakes of first-time practitioners. They become frustrated and conclude it is not worthwhile. They may even abandon animal traction altogether. A partial solution to this problem would be to train more front-line extension personnel. The Project should also put in place a system of after-sales and post-training monitoring of their clients.

A perceived problem with the adoption of donkeys in the southern parts of Ghana is the lack of a culture for keeping such animals. Extension efforts must highlight the advantages of using donkeys compared with bullocks or motorised vehicles. Such advantages include low cost of acquisition, ease of handling and potential cull value. Emphasis must also be placed on the fact that male donkeys do not normally have to be castrated for work. Thus, acquiring a male-female pair means that breeding becomes possible (this is not the case with bullocks).

Conclusions

The activities of the Animal Traction Project through demonstrations, training and equipment development have had a positive and obvious effect on donkey utilisation. This has encouraged the purchase of more donkeys from the Project and from other sources. The majority of users bought donkeys for carting refuse and farm produce. It is believed that with appropriate education more people will begin to use donkeys for draft purposes of various kinds.

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