

# Response to demand: meeting farmers' needs for donkeys in southern Africa

by

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## Abstract

*The reasons for the increasing popularity of donkeys in southern Africa are discussed. These include the donkey's tolerance of drought, small farm enterprises unable to justify investment in machinery, the desire to escape from sharecropping dominated by tractor owners, the relatively low cost of donkeys, their ease of management, endurance and longevity. It is emphasised that where need is expressed for donkeys, there is usually a shortage because of the increased number of ways in which donkeys are being used, the reluctance of owners to sell (anima/human bonding), donkeys' low reproductive rate, lack of awareness of their healthcare and husbandry needs leading to losses, negative attitudes and myths about the value and potential of donkeys and the official culling of donkeys in the past. Most problems facing donkey owners in southern Africa stem from a lack of knowledge and familiarity with donkeys, and the difficulty of giving value to their work rather than to their meat. Solutions are suggested which target national policies, education, and community action as strategies for speeding up the familiarisation process.*

## Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to report some reflections, observations, and first hand experiences with donkeys in southern Africa. These are based on the ownership of 12 donkeys over 12 years, research and training, involvement in a number of projects using donkeys, and developing equipment for them.

## Why people want donkeys

In southern Africa people want donkeys because they are appropriate for the prevailing circumstances of many small-scale farmers.

One crucial circumstance is drought, which has affected many southern African countries in recent years. During drought periods it has been seen that if one domestic animal can survive better than any

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other, it is the donkey. This survival ability has been an important factor in the increased demand for donkeys in southern Africa (Starkey, 1994).

In arid and semi-arid countries, large proportions of the population are sustained by smallholder farmers. These smallholders are farming at a scale much below their potential but nowhere near large enough to warrant investment in expensive machinery such as tractors. Planners may not recognise this, but farmers usually do. A study undertaken recently in North-West Province, South Africa (Jones and Hanekom, 1996) provides a good illustration. The majority of farmers managed with 10–15 ha, using animal-drawn plows and carts. A minority with tractors farmed 50–60 ha, and did not find it economical. They only survived from year to year with the aid of loans—which admittedly were only possible because they had tractors. To increase their income they 'sharecropped' for the smaller farmers, especially those without draft animals. Even though they took 90% of the produce of the smaller farmers' land, the tractor owners complained that this scarcely met their costs. It can be imagined what the small farmers thought about the arrangement. In their case it was a question of better a little than nothing. Although tractor owners would not go so far as to say that they would prefer animals, it was clear that they could not afford to run their tractors. The smaller farmers for whom they 'sharecropped' desperately desired animals so that they could escape from the sharecropping arrangements.

The fact that the animal most desired is the donkey may be a surprise, but it is a rational decision by farmers. In the first place, being smaller and not (usually) having a meat value, donkeys are cheaper than cattle, though not quite as cheap as they were, now that they are becoming popular. It was said in 1992 at the first ATNESA meeting in Zambia, that donkeys are less liable to theft than are cattle. Because of the demand for

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donkeys this situation is rapidly changing in Zimbabwe. In South Africa, the meat and hide value of cattle is reduced if they are worked (Jones and Hanekom, 1996), and farmers are often disinclined to risk this penalty, a further circumstance favouring donkeys.

The above circumstances and factors are well recognised by farmers in addition to donkey qualities such as their ease of management, especially by women and children, and their greater endurance and longevity.

In some countries there may be a perception among small farmers, often a justified one, that the shortage of donkeys is the result of a deliberate policy on the part of the government. Nothing could be more calculated to stimulate demand than the suggestion of denial, denial imposed by the privileged.

The demand for donkeys is therefore clearly established at the present time. What is not as clear is why there should be the feeling, indeed often the demonstrable fact, that where donkeys are needed, there are usually not enough of them. It shocks many Africans to learn that, in the USA, feral donkeys are shot to keep down their numbers, and in Britain there should be a 'sanctuary' for unwanted donkeys where hundreds of them pass their days in idleness. "Send them to us!" they might say. But it is not so easy!

### **Why there is a shortage of donkeys**

There is likely to be a shortage of donkeys where they are culled by slaughtering as was the case in Northwest Province in South Africa in 1983 (Starkey, 1995a), though it cannot be proved that any of those killed were wild, unwanted or unused. The official attitude at the time is an example of what has motivated many people to devalue and dismiss donkeys, actions which can only tend to reduce donkey numbers. The various myths which seem to have been promulgated were listed by Starkey (1995b):

- There are too many donkeys.
- Donkeys eat more than cattle.
- Donkeys eat 24 hours a day.
- Donkeys are responsible for overgrazing.
- Donkeys cause erosion.
- Donkeys poison the ground and kill pastures.
- Donkeys are non-productive.
- Donkeys have no owners or names.
- Donkeys cause road accidents.

Donkeys kick and bite.

Donkeys are stubborn or stupid.

Donkeys are expendable.

Donkeys never get sick.

Farmers want cattle not donkeys.

It is a surprise to find that donkeys had a different image in South Africa as late as the 1950s, and that there are still white farmers around, mostly elderly, who remain convinced of their value. One expects black farmers to have such a conviction, since they make up the huge majority of small-scale farmers. It is easy to forget that, before official apartheid unbalanced things entirely, many whites were also small-scale farmers without any other income. Even large-scale farmers sometimes used donkeys for the small tasks and saved their tractors for the larger operations.

The reduction in demand associated with the myths may account for some of the shortage, but it is obvious that there must be other factors operating if the farmers who do want donkeys are so sure that there are not enough of them. What has certainly changed in recent years is the type of work that donkeys are expected to do. They are no longer just transport animals and they are seldom found working with machinery and implements designed for donkeys. Instead, they are involved in cultivation work and pulling plows and even carts that were designed for oxen. Although a single donkey can do much more than half of what an ox can do (Prasad, Marovanidze and Nyathi, 1991), this usually means that two donkeys are used in place of each ox. This increases the number of donkeys required and uses them in relatively inefficient ways as compared to a situation where specially designed donkey equipment is available.

### **Price**

Another factor contributing to the shortage of donkeys is price. Donkey owners are notoriously unwilling to sell. As an owner myself, I know how reluctant I am to part with a good, loyal, hardworking animal—even if it doesn't actually do much work—in exchange for what is really a negligible amount of money compared to even a minimum human wage. Although I know that for a purchaser the price of a donkey can seem a lot. Until you actually have a donkey it is impossible to appreciate its worth.

In at least one case (CHP, 1995) a rise in price has resulted from donkeys being adopted as meat

animals. But probably another factor is the appreciation by owners of their donkeys' personalities just as much as their value. Using donkeys makes you very much aware of the differences between donkeys, and also how donkeys react to the differences between humans. A donkey works with a human, not for a human, and will work quite differently according to the human it works with. Thus a donkey-human team is formed that the owner is unwilling to break up, which is another reason for not selling your donkey.

### **Breeding and health**

Donkeys tend to breed slowly, sometimes foaling only every two or more years. Also, circumstances may not always favour survival. Donkeys are known for hardiness to the extent that they may be believed not to suffer from any illness at all (Starkey, 1995b). Whether because of this or for more sinister reasons, they are commonly afforded little or no veterinary or health care, in contrast to cattle. One result of this is that their health needs are hardly known. In the author's experience veterinarians can be surprised at the variable length of a donkey pregnancy.

Although a dry, hot climate is one in which a donkey thrives, rural areas of Africa still harbour other threats to a donkey's health: excessive rain, often coinciding with foaling times and causing influenza, huge burdens of intestinal worms, rabies, poisonous snakes, predators such as lions and crocodiles, and a lack of barriers or supervision near roads along which vehicles come infrequently but very fast.

### **Management**

Losses inevitably occur due to lack of supervision. The fencing of grazing areas for herd animals is still far too expensive for small-scale farmers in southern Africa, and in any case such animals usually graze on communal land. Particularly those that range as far as donkeys require the vigilance of human herders. In African societies, traditionally, these were boys. Today, however, the older boys are in school, women and girls are too busy with household tasks and the crops, and men consider the work beneath them. Too often, therefore, animal supervision becomes the task of pre-school boys, little older than toddlers.

Small-scale farmers may (or may not) get some help from extension services in managing their cattle. By and large other animals have to fend for themselves. Since, with the exception of cats and

dogs, most of the other livestock consist of meat animals, the inadvertent death of one of them is not necessarily a disaster. Where donkeys are not used for meat it is clear that their chances of support or of investment in their care, are negligible.

### **Traditions**

The shallowness of tradition is another factor in the shortage of donkeys in southern Africa. Although in origin an African animal whose antiquity is attested to in ancient Egyptian frescoes, the donkey was very slow to penetrate further south. Rainforests would obviously not favour donkeys, so it is intriguing that the East African highlands do not seem to have provided a route and that their presence in southern Africa seems to be thanks to the Dutch occupation of the Cape (Joubert, 1995) from where they spread northwards.

Colonial occupation of Africa north of the Limpopo mostly took place in the early and middle years of this century, when the combination of the internal combustion engine and cheap fuel was exerting its enchantment, and animals were seen by comparison as demanding, smelly, spreaders of disease, and more importantly slow. The donkey in particular thus arrived with all the cultural baggage that Europeans were then loading on its back.

Slowness and smallness were interpreted as inferiority, and wilfulness as stupidity (Jones, 1991). Few of the donkey's positive qualities were recognised and the bad ones were taken out of context and not seen as contributing to the animal's ability to survive.

That survivability is precisely why the donkey stands today ready to resume the burden of work for small farmers in poor countries—the farmers on whom more and more of the world's population depends for its food. Nevertheless, as recently as a decade ago there were policy-makers determined to regard poverty as symptomatic of the lack of machines, and to end dependence on animals like the donkey. The 1983 donkey massacre in Bophutatswana (Starkey, 1995a) was the most dramatic, and let us hope the last example of measures taken to this end. Its consequence was not only to create a shortage—though not an absence—of donkeys in that area to this day, but also to create a fury among farmers that still demands redress.

Something similar has occurred in Zimbabwe. During the War of Independence in the 1970s donkeys were routinely shot in Matabeleland South because the army believed that they carried arms across the border from Botswana at night. Donkeys have long been popular in this drought-stricken province. Their popularity there today is demonstrated both in their ubiquity and in my mailbag. It is from there that I receive most queries and correspondence about donkeys.

### Supplying donkeys

In southern Africa the distribution of donkeys is much more uneven than the distribution of small-scale farmers (Francis, 1996). Countries with hot, dry environments and a history of little colonial or state intervention, such as Botswana, are relatively well supplied with donkeys. Neighbouring countries such as Zambia and South Africa may wish to take advantage of any surplus donkeys that Botswana can spare. Some years ago the Malawi Government was planning to obtain donkeys from Botswana (Kumwenda and Mateyo, 1991), although in the end only a few were actually imported.

One of the problems in moving animals from one country to another is the complexity of the veterinary regulations which need to be negotiated and which can block the process altogether. These regulations may concern diseases that do not affect donkeys at all and that were designed to protect meat rather than animals, ie, human health and safety are their purpose. Foot and mouth disease control is an example.

In Zimbabwe, we have had a recent experience of the Zambian government trying to obtain donkeys (Jones, 1996). Our Ministry of Agriculture quickly told the Zambians that there were some districts where donkeys were still in short supply, and that they should do their buying in Matabeleland South. In the end they obtained perhaps a third of the number they were aiming for, and not all of them survived the transfer to Zambia. The following are some of the difficulties faced by the cross-border purchasers and purchasers in general.

There are no traditional or regular donkey markets or trading arrangements, unlike the situation for cattle or even for horse trading in the past. Such arrangements are not easy to establish for donkeys if only because of many of the difficulties described in this paper.

Although there may be an agreed prevailing price for donkeys, people selling their animals may suddenly perceive this as too low when they see that a demand exists, yet there is no tradition of price bargaining and no expectation of it. Variation in price according to quality of animal is a notion that is entirely novel.

The emotional dependence of donkeys on other donkeys can result in a well-behaved animal transforming upon sale into a disturbed and disruptive one, or otherwise into a depressed or dead one. And since the purchaser of a donkey is buying an animal for work, its behaviour is an important part of what is being bought. The only way around this problem is to buy donkeys in settled pairs. Both sellers and buyers need to be aware of this.

Donkeys may be emotionally and physically dependent on their territory. Abrupt departure from it may not only result in changed behaviour and stress, but may also expose the animals to unfamiliar plant communities which they may not eat, although nutritious, or eat although poisonous.

Since the observation and marking of routes is a normal donkey activity, travel in a motor vehicle, particularly an open vehicle from which they can see a landscape, can create profound mental disturbance, to the point of real shock in donkeys. This has physiological consequences, notably in the processing of blood glucose that cannot easily be reversed and may result in eventual death (Svendsen, 1990, personal communication).

Although donkeys can withstand high temperatures and a certain amount of water deprivation (Mueller and Houpt, 1991; Yousef, 1991), there are clearly limits to the severity of conditions they can cope with. The digestive system of donkeys requires a fairly frequent food intake, even more so when they are stressed. One of the sure signs of stress, ie, emotional upset, in a donkey, is diarrhoea which can occur in relatively trivial contexts. Unlike ruminants donkeys cannot be left in pens or lorries for days on end without food.

The last two difficulties can be solved by transporting the donkeys on their own feet and at their own pace and allowing them opportunities for grazing along the way. This could be cheaper than lorry transport, but in the modern context, especially in Africa, it presents difficulties of its own. 'Drove roads', with organised feeding areas and overnight pens and where animals have right of way no longer exist. In the absence of such facilities, travelling with a large number of donkeys could present problems, though travel with two or three is still possible, especially if one of them can be ridden.

### How are donkeys received?

For various reasons which are outside the scope of this paper it is not market forces which are currently distributing donkeys to where they are needed. It is rather international donor agencies, with or without the participation of national government agencies. Zambia's programme on donkeys was apparently financed by the Netherlands Government and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and organised by Zambia's Department of Agriculture.

In my own district of Zimbabwe the charity Christian Care came to the conclusion that draft power was needed and arranged a 'donkey loan programme'. This was a sort of revolving donkey pool, organised through the council-run agricultural training centre (KMTC, 1992). One feature of projects such as these is that donkeys are seen in purely mechanical and quantitative terms. Arrangements for their purchase, transport and allocation to users tend to be made by people with little understanding of the donkey's social behaviour, and even less understanding of the animal's own qualities and needs.

Inevitably donkeys do play a social role. They are seen as an item in a household's wealth, and since it is also one that increases a household's productivity, it can inspire envy. A donkey can also be troublesome, particularly if unsupervised. It is intelligent enough to know that its favourite foods are to be found in ripe fields and granaries and it will head for those if not stopped. Naturally a donkey does not pay any regard to who may or may not own a field or granary. Add to this the tendency of uncastrated male donkeys to go ranging long distances in search of mates, and their aggressive behaviour towards other donkeys when engaged in such activities, and you have a recipe for trouble between human neighbours.

Troubles of the above kind can occur even where donkeys are under daily supervision, and enclosed at night. It becomes much more acute however, in contexts where the castration of male animals is uncommon and the supervision of grazing animals largely neglected in the dry season. Both of these tend to occur because of the shortage of labour for herding and general care, but the reasons most often given are that it is 'customary'—customary not to castrate, customary to let animals wander and sleep where they like once crops are harvested and before plowing begins again. Donkeys are creatures of habit, but eating freely and ranging long distances are also much to their taste, in the interests of which they will quickly form new and wilder habits—and then be difficult to find once they are needed.

### Donkey loan programme

In my own area, the 'donkey loan programme' mentioned above was begun in 1985. It involved trainees completing an agricultural course at the local training centre and being given a plow and two donkeys, one male and one female. The idea was that they should breed so that repayment could be made in the form of young donkeys to be distributed elsewhere. However, both proper record-keeping and the repayment strategy were neglected in the initial stages. Five years later it was decided that local committees should be formed to administer the programme, rather than the training centre itself. Shortly after that a survey was conducted which established that donkey recipients could and indeed did increase their agricultural production—by as much as 41%—but that there had been no increase in the number of donkeys in the six years or so since they had been distributed. It is quite possible that farmers were not admitting to any donkey increase in order to avoid repaying the loans. There were reports of 'losses' of donkeys as distinct from deaths, although lack of veterinary care was also seen as a factor in the low rate of reproduction (KMTC, 1992).

I can bear testimony to the type of loss reported, as often my own donkeys have been blamed for the damage that stray donkeys have done. On one occasion in self-defence I rounded up two of the strays and took them with my donkeys 60 km to where they could be used and supervised out of harm's way. At the beginning of every rainy season, when donkeys are needed for plowing, there is always someone who claims that one or

more of my donkeys actually belongs to them and I am not the only local donkey-owner to be burdened with refuting such claims. One reason for this carelessness and confusion is, as ever, the unavailability of labour. Children are in school; men (if they are lucky) have paid jobs, and the women are far too busy with their routine tasks.

Another important aspect of donkey supervision is the need to appreciate that donkeys are significantly different from cattle and goats, that are meat animals, rather than workers, and so may be valued differently. In addition, cattle and goats do not range as far as donkeys when grazing freely. Then there is the matter of degree of usage. If an animal is seen as useful during only one season it is liable to be regarded, even by its owners, as nothing more than a nuisance during the rest of the year.

#### **Problems of donkey ownership**

So the ownership of donkeys can give rise to the following problems:

- extension advice on the health care and long-distance transport of donkeys is generally lacking, leading to failure in these two aspects of animal husbandry and discouragement all round
- newly acquired donkeys may pine and even die because of separation from their friends or through having been transported wrongly, if they survive, they may be difficult to control
- donkeys go missing and are not found when needed
- donkeys do damage to stored crops not only in their owner's home but over quite a large area
- uncastrated donkeys may do even more damage, including damage to other donkeys, in some cases even causing their death
- dead donkeys normally have to be buried, rather than eaten, because if left to decompose they may cause health problems among humans.

Further discouragement may be caused by the relative inefficiency of the donkey's work due to lack of information concerning equipment and other aspects of management.

#### **Some solutions and policy implications**

Of course, many of these problems eventually solve themselves as donkeys become an established part of human societies (Fielding,

1994). But we are considering here societies not too familiar with donkeys, which need them and want them. Our task is to speed up the rate of familiarisation.

Solutions may be divided into three kinds: those achievable through specific national government policies, those achievable through educational impact on culture and those achievable by the actions of the communities concerned.

#### **National policies**

The following specific national policies are required:

- include in the curriculum of all extension workers, and not just as an option that they may choose, material on donkeys which emphasises the ways in which they are different from other domestic animals, and the special problems and responsibilities that they entail

- include in animal welfare legislation specific clauses on donkeys that take into account their special characteristics and also the way in which donkeys are used and are most useful.

#### **Educational requirements**

The following suggestions are made for educational establishments, particularly at the primary level:

- include donkeys in science, agricultural and even geography curricula and textbooks, emphasising their work capacity, essential differences compared to other agricultural animals, and their favourable place in the environment compared to machines and large ruminants

- ensure repeated mention in all sorts of texts which can picture donkeys as easy to handle, but needing fairly constant supervision and therefore the responsibility of the whole family, including adult men

- promote the discussion of the donkey's role in various books of the Old and New Testament, as part of bible studies in churches and school curricula.

#### **Community action**

Within communities, the following actions are suggested to improve the situation:

- any project leader planning to use donkeys, but preferably extension workers, should first

discuss with community leaders the problems of donkey ownership, as described above

leadership discussion should include local politicians as well as chiefs, headmen etc, in addition to local businessmen and commercial farmers so that all viewpoints can be expressed and evaluated

group discussions to be recorded and locally disseminated, so that the whole community is aware of them and they exist for future reference in case of dispute.

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