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Comparison of the socio-economic value and welfare of working donkeys in rural and urban Ethiopia

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Abstract

Donkeys (*Equus asinus*) are widely used throughout Ethiopia and play essential roles in a variety of everyday and income-generating tasks for the people that use them. The challenges faced by people and their working equids vary across communities and geographic locations. This may have implications for how donkeys are perceived by the people they work for, the roles they fulfil and ultimately their welfare. Two complementary methodological approaches were used in this study to explore the socio-economic value of donkeys for their owners and the welfare of the donkeys in rural and urban Ethiopia. Using a questionnaire, donkey owners were asked about their donkeys, their attitudes and beliefs related to donkey use and ownership, and the role donkeys played in their lives. Animal-based welfare assessments were also conducted on a sample of donkeys from different locations, with the overarching aim of the study to investigate differences in use, beliefs, and donkey welfare between rural and urban locations. In both rural and urban locations, working donkeys are critical for their owners' income-generating activity and therefore their livelihoods. The work they undertake differs substantially between locations, as does their welfare. Work in each setting presents its own challenges and these are reflected in the behaviour and physical health of the donkeys. Rural donkeys showed more apathetic behaviour, a higher ectoparasite burden and greater evidence of tethering/hobbling. Urban donkeys were more alert and had a wider range of body condition scores. The findings highlight marked differences in the role and welfare of donkeys between different areas within the same country, demonstrating the importance of understanding the context, both from the perspective of humans and working equids, prior to staging interventions intended to benefit either party.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, behaviour, donkey, questionnaire, working equids