

A Look At Ethiopian Equids

There are an estimated nine million equids in Ethiopia, supporting people in a variety of tasks such as light cultivation work, threshing and carting. Providing transport services and traction power at low cost to resource-poor households, equids have contributed substantially to the diversification of livelihoods in rural Ethiopia. However, their contribution may be impeded by poor welfare resulting from challenging economic conditions, educational deficits and cultural attitudes towards animals. In June 2015, with the generous financial support of the Katie Wilkinson Research Scholarship, together with ground support from the Society for the Protection for Animals Abroad (SPANA), I visited eight locations in central Ethiopia to conduct qualitative research on equine husbandry and the social values which shape it. This research, once analysed, will be shared with SPANA in the hope that any care and knowledge deficits revealed can be addressed through SPANA's educational and outreach programmes.



Donkeys in Adama

During my month-long visit I, with the assistance of a translator from the Donkey Sanctuary, conducted 55 interviews and two informal focus groups. Questions generally fell into one of two broad areas: practical management and cultural significance, the latter of which incorporated the impact of equine ownership on human status and relationships. Practical management topics included workloads (e.g. weight limits and daily schedules), veterinary treatment and pathogens, grooming, hoof care and farriery, division of equine care between the household, acquisitions and

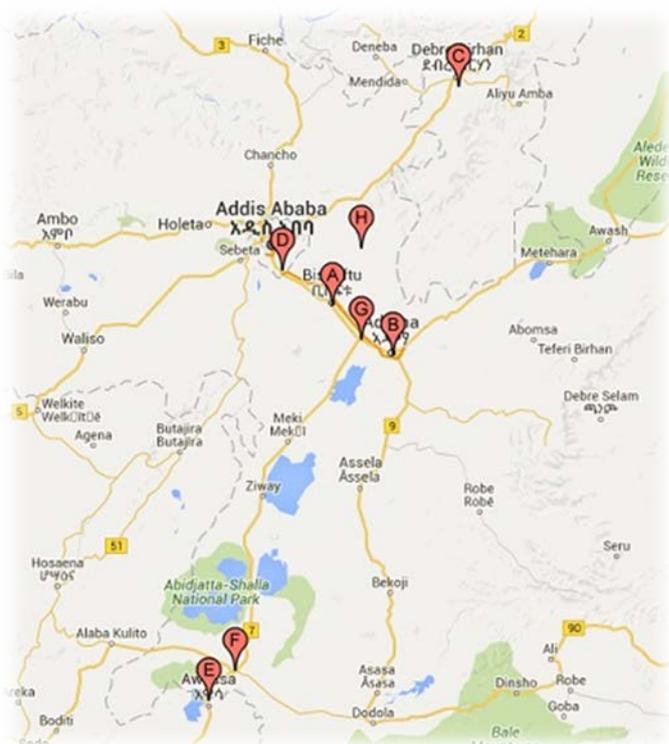
disposals, equipment, diet and nutrition, and legalities. The cultural study investigated the way in which equine species are perceived and valued within society, both in everyday life as well as in art and folklore.



A farrier at work in Mojo

While the results are still being written up and analysed for the purpose of the dissertation, in brief it is clear that horses enjoy superiority above other equids, being preferred for their strength and speed. Some participants considered their horses equal to their children, although in many sites naming a horse, or even using verbal instructions or other vocal utterances, is uncommon. Visiting eight locations allowed us to see such variances in regional behaviour, and in one site we saw overladen donkeys forced to stand all day – a practice which has been eradicated elsewhere through education, but the outreach has not had an effect in this one site. Why is that?

That's precisely the sort of question which makes research of this type invaluable. Anthropology allows us to recognise the cultural aspects which perpetuate damaging behaviours - whether they relate to welfare, the environment or any other aspect of life - and identify the changes needed in order to limit the damage.



Research locations

- A – Bishoftu
- B – Adama
- C – Debre Birhan
- D – Akaky
- E – Awassa
- F – Shashamane
- G – Mojo
- H - Chefe

In addition to benefitting Ethiopian equids and their owners, it is not possible to overstate the importance of this opportunity to me, both as a student and as a person. Ethiopia is not a popular tourism destination, and without this research and the funds which made it possible I doubt I would have ever had the chance to visit. I've long been interested in the topic of working animals but this was my first real exposure to their plight, providing an insight as to whether I'd be able to work within this environment or whether it would be too emotionally demanding for me as an animal lover. I'm pleased to say that, in spite of the difficult conditions, I now know that I can remain professional and suitably detached from my personal feelings on the matter. Furthermore, this research has introduced me to a network of professionals operating within equine welfare in a development setting, and I've had offers to do more research with SPANA's Ethiopian team in the future, as well as an invitation to head office to meet the team there. Now in my final year of university, I will shortly be applying for further study in animal welfare and I know the subject of my dissertation, and the experience gained therein, will be my greatest asset as an applicant. The Katie Wilkinson Research Scholarship has facilitated my dream, and in turn I hope I can facilitate the dream of a better life for working animals and their owners.

Thank you.

