

Live Export of Horses, Ponies and Donkeys for Meat and Skins (Ejiao) for Overseas Slaughter

The Australian federal Department of Agriculture is preparing regulatory changes to facilitate the live export of horses, ponies and donkeys (equines). This has been due to numerous enquiries from China. In China the meat from horses, ponies and donkeys is eaten and the skins of the donkeys are dried and ground up to make a gelatine based substance which may be combined with herbs to produce a substance called "ejiao". This is a traditional Chinese medicine previously only used by royalty for over 2000 years to improve their appearance (collagen in face creams) and vitality (where it is eaten in the form of a gelatinous bar, pill or tonic), but due to the ever increasing affluent Chinese middle class and the awareness through advertising from 2010 onwards the demand has increased exponentially in the last couple of years and now ejiao trading is occurring on eBay and Amazon .

The current global trade in donkey skins is 1.8 million per year and most of these end up in China, but the demand is for 4 to 10 million per year. The price is rapidly escalating and donkey populations in mostly third world countries are being decimated to the extent that donkeys are being stolen and butchered to harvest their skins from the people that depend on their donkeys to survive. Donkeys are valued by these subsistence farming people as hard working animals being used for packing, riding, ploughing or pulling carts. Unfortunately due to the demand for donkey skins the people whose donkeys are stolen now cannot afford to replace their donkeys. An Ethiopian proverb is a woman without a donkey is a donkey herself!

Now the Chinese are looking at our feral Australian donkey population (which has not been quantified) and suddenly our wild donkeys are seen to have a value. There is currently no protocol for the export of live donkeys, horses or ponies to China. The Northern Territory Government produced in 2015 a document titled 'Information for Prospective Investors in Donkey Farming, Processing and Export of Donkey Products in the Northern Territory' and in 2016 produced a guide to 'Donkey Control and Commercial Farming' stating that currently the donkey numbers are kept down by aerial and ground culling, trapping and selling and non-lethal fertility control.

Our main concerns are from a welfare perspective which equally applies to horses, ponies or donkeys consigned to export.

This potential export means that the equines will need to be sourced in large numbers from the wild where they are spread over large distances on remote inland stations or caught in rugged rough areas, from horse sales or purchased from owners. The gelatine in the donkey skins is intended for human consumption and currently in Australia there are already three export mixed species abattoirs which slaughter horses and camels for human consumption overseas being located at Caboolture QLD, Charleville QLD (which is a Chinese investment due to open in 2017) and Peterborough SA which potentially could be used to slaughter donkeys. There is also an abattoir in WA that slaughters small numbers of horses for Australian consumption. There are Australian transport requirements that stock transporters are required to adhere to, but where the equines are feral unloading and reloading or providing rest, feed or water as per the requirements will be difficult, if not impossible and very hard to police. The equines will be subjected to: stress and possibly disease, injury and death during the mustering process, yarding, loading, transport over long distances, held in holding yards and if they are exported live then being transported to a port,

loaded on a ship, penned during sea transit and then on arrival overseas unloaded and transported to slaughter.

Other welfare factors on live transport ships are: change of feed, overcrowding, heat stress, pneumonia, climatic changes, no contingency plans if equines are rejected at port on arrival, higher mortality rates and unacceptable handling and inhumane slaughter practices in importing countries. The Australian Government has tried to control what happens when live cattle and sheep are exported but when they are landed in another country Australian laws and Australian standards and expectations for the treatment and handling of animals to be slaughtered do not apply.

Donkeys are classified as a pest animal here in Australia and if the trade is only interested in the skins the basic care, feeding and handling of these donkeys will be neglected. Donkeys need dental and hoof care but as there is no additional monetary return for providing this basic welfare it is unlikely to be provided by exporters and if feral animals are involved it would be a dangerous activity. These donkeys may also be sick, weak or malnourished and additional transport to abattoirs would prolong their suffering and delay euthanasia.

The Chinese are already farming donkeys to meet the demand for the skins but donkeys do not breed well in stressful situations, gestation is 12 months and artificial insemination is not very successful. They are selecting for larger donkeys and faster maturing donkeys but are nowhere near keeping up with the demand.

If the export trade was in chilled and frozen equine meat and the donkey skins removed and dried here in Australia it would prevent a lot of unnecessary suffering in overseas transport and their inhumane treatment during the slaughtering processes used.

Ejiao can sell for around \$500.00 Australian dollars for a kilogram.

Further Reading:

The Donkey Sanctuary in the UK - 'Under the Skin' January 2017

RSPCA Senate Petition:

www.liveexport.org.au

Please help the Donkey Society of Victoria to prevent this live export from happening. Talk to your friends and family and encourage them to sign the above petition to stop the potential suffering of thousands of our beautiful wild Australian donkeys.

Leanne Davey
Acting President - Donkey Society of Victoria Incorporated

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