

Two Donkeys or Not Two Donkeys? That is the question!

By Fiona Mottram

ONE of the first bits of information new or prospective buyers ask – or are told – is one donkey or two? (Or one mule or two?) In general, the DSV supports the keeping of two or more donkeys together. The reason is they love to play together, groom each other, graze side by side and take turns standing watch while the other lies down or sleeps. They are very sociable and some donkeys get very depressed if they live alone. One of my donkeys had got very depressed and lost condition when kept like that by a previous owner. At the next owner's home she was bullied by the existing clique of donkeys. Then at my place she found her true love and



blossomed.

A few donkeys don't seem to mind or even prefer their quiet life. I think this is the minority situation though and there are many who simply accept it through lack of choice but I believe they miss out on the much better quality of life that another donkey's company gives.

I have heard of donkeys that have another species of animal such as an alpaca, goat, cow or sheep for company and they are really good mates. Again I think this is a minority preference. I imagine it would be like living on a desert island with only a pig for company. You'd get on and learn to live together but the conversation wouldn't be too stimulating for either side.

As a rule I think equine company at minimum and another donkey at best is most valuable because they give each other the right social signals and behaviours. But the answer is flexible. Some donkeys get on really well with other equines - horses, ponies or mules and vice-versa. And some don't. Some are terrified of them. It depends on the individual animals. Mules tend to like horses/ponies because their mother was one.

Photo left: *Tambo* and *Diggy's* body language shows their close bond and mutual comfort. This behaviour is often most visible while away from home.

The success of equine company – whether another donkey or mule or pony also depends on dominant and submissive personalities, age, gender, and perhaps size. You don't want one animal being bullied by another. This can range from aggressive behaviour and chasing with possibilities for injuries, through to denying access to feed or sufficient peace to graze. But you can be surprised. I know of instances where tiny donkeys or mules have dominated over huge horses and chased them around to exhaustion.



The equines need to be interested in each other and get along. This can take time. Before they became utterly best friends, my jenny *Kate* sulked for a week when my second donkey *Mary* arrived. At first she chased *Mary* away nastily whenever she came close. *Kate* didn't want to share my attention at first. *Mary* persisted however and when *Kate* realised the benefits of company, they became inseparable. It can also take much longer to make friends.

In another example, a friend from harness club borrowed a donkey to get her horse accustomed to them because it was quite nervous of my longears at harness club outings. At first the horse wouldn't even let the owner near if she had touched the donkey first. After a while the horse relented and made friends. My friend was forced to return the donkey back to its normal owner after her horse started to refuse to leave the paddock if his donkey mate had to be left behind! And the horse still didn't like any of my donkeys or mules when they met at club events.

If you are getting a donkey or mule and already have a pony or horse, try and buy the newcomer on a no-problems-return trial so you can see if they will become friends. And if they don't after a month, or some other period by agreement, arrange that you can

return your purchase. A seller that has the animal's best interests at heart should be happy to agree to this. Of course some people are happy to buy an extra longears if needed to buddy up, but not everyone has the space or finances to do this. And lately it has been hard finding an affordable, handled donkey to buy at all, so acquiring two can be quite difficult. If you are keeping your donkey or mule on agistment or sharing facilities with a neighbour, there may be sufficient company from other equines if they get along.

Photo left: Lorraine McCluskey's donkey *Benson* and pony *Tramp* live together very well.

If you have never had a donkey or mule before, you may also consider getting just one initially so you can bond with it and learn about handling it before taking on a second longears. Be sure to give **lots** of attention though. 24 hours in a paddock alone is a long time especially if it happens day after day. And for the first week or longer, the donkey or mule may pace the fence constantly, try to get out and call out lots, trying to discover if there is any longears company in the neighborhood, whether it can return to its old home, and wondering where its mates or mother have disappeared to.

If you are going packing, you might only have one donkey but you would be spending almost all your time together out on the track.

If you buy two donkeys or mules together, especially unhandled or recently wild donkeys, they may be so bonded to each other that they don't feel the need to socialise or cooperate with you! Taming and training will be quite slow and frustrating if that happens. Ask the seller if the longears come

when called and enjoy spending time with humans.

In summary, there is no single definite answer to 'must I have two donkeys or mules?' And you can't insist what is the best option for someone else. The most you can do is refuse

to sell them an animal if you are not happy with the anticipated situation. The optimal solution will depend on the acquiring owner's situation, how and where the longears will be kept, and the individual donkeys or mules involved.