

# UNDER THE SKIN

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The emerging trade in donkey skins and its implications for donkey welfare and livelihoods.

JANUARY 2017

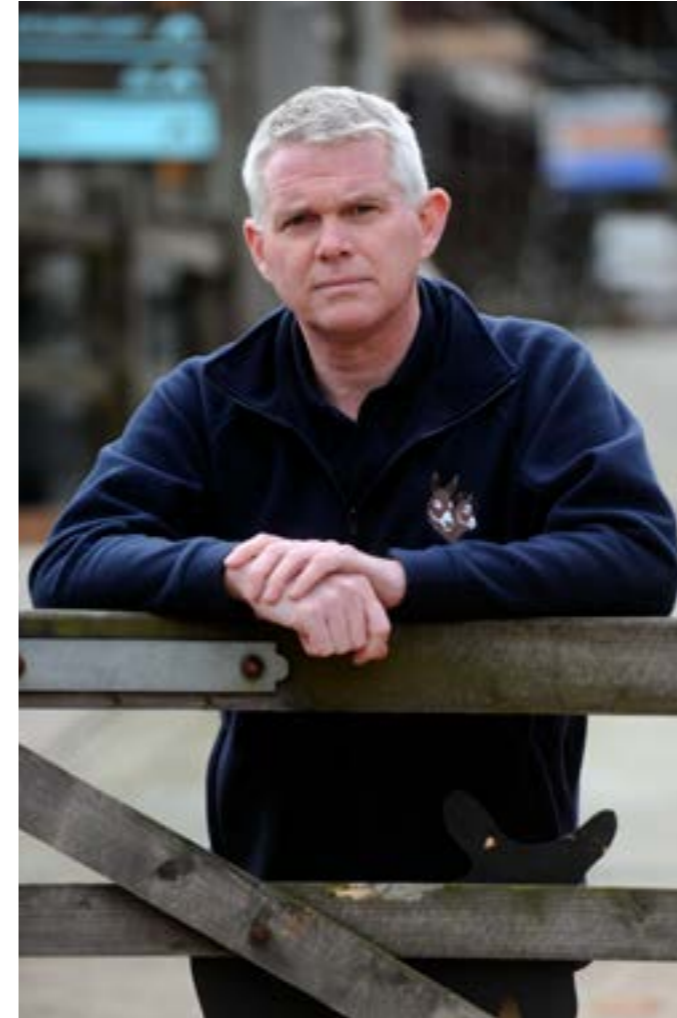


**THE DONKEY  
SANCTUARY**

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## FOREWORD BY MIKE BAKER



Can you imagine what it must be like to wake up one morning and find that every car in your town or village has been stripped of its engine and wheels? No vehicles – no means of transport for you or anyone in your community. All those journeys we take for granted – the school run, getting to work every day, the food shop – suddenly becoming arduous or impossible tasks.

Recently, in a rural community in Tanzania, this is exactly what happened – only the precious vehicles weren't cars, but donkeys. The villagers woke up to find all 24 of their hardworking animals had been stolen, killed and stripped of their skins overnight. A devastating blow for the community and a horrific way for these hard-working donkeys to die.

This is just one example of the impact the global trading of donkeys' skins is now having on donkey welfare and the livelihood of people around the world. The current demand for skins is relentless, and as the key ingredient in the prized traditional Chinese medicine called ejiao, their prices have rocketed. Communities the world over risk being impoverished and losing their independence.

Our report reveals the shocking scale of this global trade as it races to keep up with an ever-growing demand for the product. Donkey populations cannot continue to be decimated and communities must not be deprived of their only means of survival. Action must now be taken to curb this trade, in the interest of both animal and human welfare.

Mike Baker  
Chief Executive

## INTRODUCTION

The global donkey population is estimated at 44 million<sup>(1)</sup> and is largely associated with economically developing nations where donkeys are predominantly working animals. The donkey's role socially, culturally and economically varies widely depending upon the communities in which it lives and works. Its traditional, domesticated roles have included packing, riding, ploughing and carting, with lesser roles in entertainment and food production.

Whilst the role of the donkey as a production animal has been evident throughout history, with records of donkey meat and milk being prized by the ancient Egyptians<sup>(2)</sup>, the consumption of products of donkey origin was limited in the 20th century, with a re-emergence noticed in the 21st century.

During the last three years The Donkey Sanctuary has become aware of an emerging interest in the use of donkeys as production animals, with the most highly valued products being skins (often referred to as hides), meat and milk. Global demand for diverse products of donkey origin has escalated rapidly, with a particular interest in the premium products resulting from donkey skins.

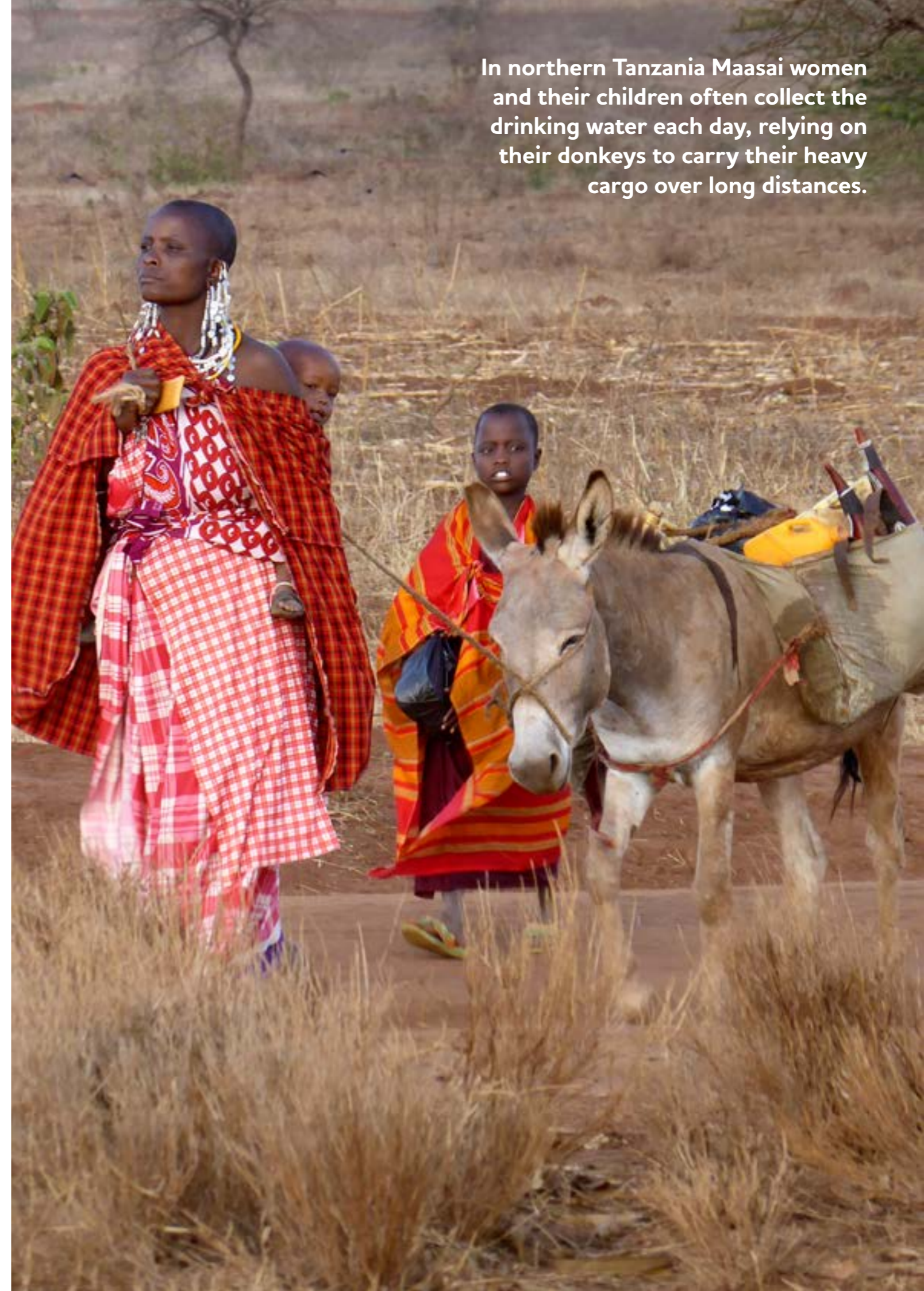
The scale of this trade has caused alarm in many sectors of society globally. Widespread reports in the global media describe poor animal welfare, threats to the security of rural livelihoods and food fraud. Until now, little specific information has been available, with patchy evidence on important issues such as numbers of donkeys slaughtered, trade routes, product prices and welfare conditions for donkeys both before and during slaughter.

This report provides an overview of the current situation relating in particular to the donkey-skin trade and to a lesser extent its associated meat trade. (Separate information is available on the emerging donkey-milk industry from The Donkey Sanctuary.) The report itself is informed by news reports in local and national media from within countries active in donkey-product trading, and through The Donkey Sanctuary's global network of partners. With little legislation in place to protect donkeys, donkey owners, primary traders and product consumers, limited information is otherwise available to external agencies with which to assess and monitor the size and scale of this trade.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Donkey Sanctuary would like to offer sincere thanks to its network of friends, partners and colleagues around the world who contributed information to this report and who champion donkey welfare every day. The sensitive nature of their information means we have anonymised some contributions to this report but this does not belie their valued contributions. We will continue to support and work together with partners to tackle donkey-welfare challenges worldwide.

**In northern Tanzania Maasai women and their children often collect the drinking water each day, relying on their donkeys to carry their heavy cargo over long distances.**



## THE DONKEY AS A PRODUCTION ANIMAL

As a beast of burden, the role of the donkey has changed very little over the centuries. The donkey continues to fulfil its age-old role of carrying goods to market, cultivating land, fetching and carrying household essentials or pulling carts<sup>(3, 4)</sup>. However, throughout its history as a domesticated animal the donkey has also been used to produce products for human consumption or use. Products of donkey origin have been highly sought after for many centuries, with the ancient Egyptians both prizing donkey milk and consuming donkey meat<sup>(2)</sup>. In more recent times the consumption of donkey meat has still been undertaken by some groups in Africa, where it is valued as an inexpensive and readily accessible source of animal protein<sup>(5)</sup>. Until recently the majority of donkey meat consumed within Africa resulted from the slaughter of donkeys which were either too old or too incapacitated to continue to work. The consumption of donkey meat in some parts of China continues to be a popular tradition, with donkey meat being highly prized and correspondingly expensive<sup>(6)</sup>. Conversely, in many communities throughout the world the consumption of donkey meat or products is taboo. This aversion may be due to local culture or religious doctrine such as within the Muslim faith where donkey flesh is considered 'haram' (forbidden)<sup>(5)</sup>.

Most notable within the last two years has been the emergence of large-scale global trading in donkey skins, with estimates of a minimum of 1.8 million donkey skins being traded per year. In turn, global demand has been conservatively estimated to be up to four million<sup>(7)</sup>, with some sources reporting upper limits of demand in China to be 10 million skins per annum<sup>(8)</sup>. Donkey skins are used to produce a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) called ejiao, otherwise known as Colla corii asini or 'donkey hide glue', which is based upon extracts of donkey gelatin in the hide mixed with herbs and other ingredients, often to form a gelatinous bar, pill or tonic<sup>(9)</sup>. Ejiao is a medicine with ancient roots and has been promoted as a product worthy of emperors. Wide-ranging health benefits are claimed for the products, including anti-ageing properties, an increase in libido and a reduction in reproductive-organ disease in women. Numerous scientific studies in mammal models have been published, with



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scientists claiming significant health benefits<sup>(9 - 11)</sup>. For example, Wang et al.<sup>(9)</sup> report that "Colla corii asini (ejiao) may have the effect to suppress the ageing process through enhancing antioxidant activity, scavenging free radicals, and modulating aging-related gene expression". Similarly, after identifying the micronutrient basis of ejiao, Wu et al.<sup>(10)</sup> conclude that ejiao "may particularly have the potential to benefit cancer patients suffering from myelosuppression due to radiotherapy or chemotherapy". Chinese interest in verifying the mode of action and providing evidence of success of TCM has led to numerous studies upon Colla corii asini, with reviews available widely. Whilst some of the data presented may be questionable, others present plausible benefits in peer-reviewed journals<sup>(12)</sup>. The increasing wealth and diaspora of the Chinese middle classes, alongside the apparent credibility of ejiao products, appears to have created such a high level of demand for donkey skins that global supply is struggling to keep up, leading to high prices and widespread claims of fraud<sup>(7, 13)</sup>. Such high levels of demand by the Chinese market are undoubtedly fuelling global reports of poor donkey welfare, theft and a sudden increase in the purchase price of donkeys. Products of donkey origin are so highly sought after that ejiao can sell for up to £300/kg.



**Hundreds of donkey skins drying in the sun as part of the production process of ejiao. The global demand is estimated to be between four and ten million skins per annum.**

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## EMERGING TRADE IN DONKEY SKINS

### THE MARKET FOR EJIAO

Whilst the consumption of donkey meat and milk is increasing, it appears to be the demand for donkey skins which is the driving factor in the increasing slaughter of donkeys globally. In the past in China ejiao was the preserve of royalty and was popular until the early 20th century. Later attempts by the government to curtail the availability of ejiao meant that legislation was introduced by the government in 1994 to price-fix ejiao products, leading to a dramatic decrease in availability<sup>(14)</sup>. The rapid expansion of China's cash-rich middle classes has fuelled demand for exclusive or luxury TCM products such as ejiao, rhino horn and tiger parts that have historical roots and can be traced back many centuries. Marketing of ejiao through television and the internet, in particular since 2010<sup>(14)</sup>, has increased appeal to a younger, more consumer-driven audience. Whilst the principal market for ejiao is within China, there appears to be increasing interest in ejiao products globally. News reports have highlighted the availability of products containing ejiao in TCM stores in London<sup>(15)</sup> and being freely traded through international trading platforms such as eBay and Amazon.

### EJIAO PRODUCTION

Production and marketing of ejiao products has been undertaken by a number of China-based enterprises, the largest being Dong'e Ejiao which was founded in 1952. It currently has over 10,000 employees, reportedly processes in excess of one million skins per year and is listed on China's stock exchange<sup>(3)</sup>. Other, smaller enterprises and more generalist TCM manufacturers have recently entered this lucrative market, undoubtedly adding to competition for raw materials and increasing the risk of food and product fraud. Production of ejiao is proving to be increasingly mechanised, with all aspects of production from slaughter and skinning through to production of ejiao bars utilising modern technologies. For example, at a recent trade show in Beijing a robotic ejiao production system was demonstrated which claims to reduce the costs of production through labour-saving methods<sup>(16)</sup>.

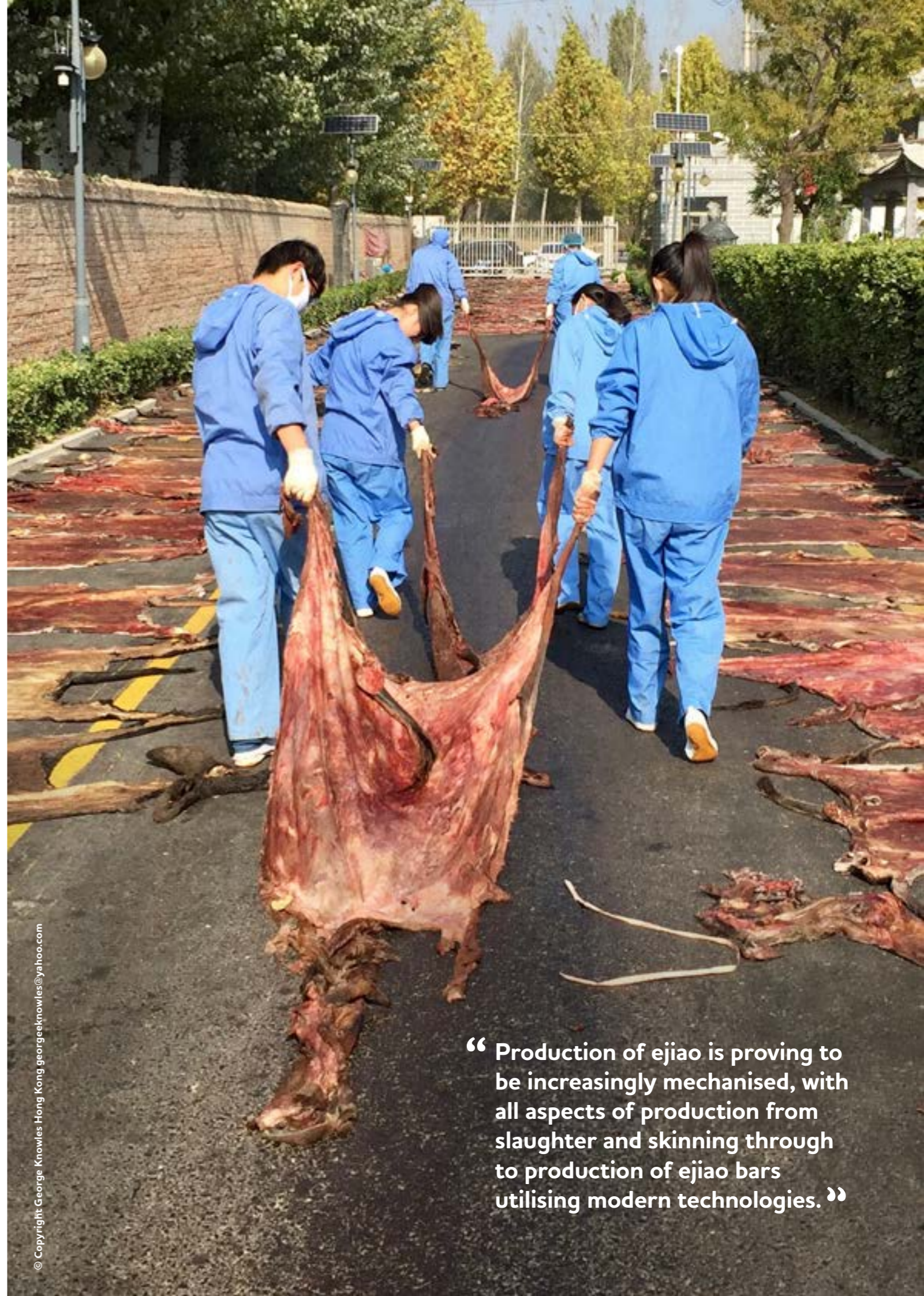
### CHINA'S DONKEY POPULATION

Whilst demand within China for ejiao has soared, Chinese agricultural authorities have reported that donkey numbers have reduced drastically, from an estimated 11 million in 1990 to an estimated six million in 2014<sup>(1, 17)</sup>. Although a number of farmers have attempted to capitalise on the increasing demand for donkey products through the 'farming' of donkeys, many have struggled to supply adequate numbers due to donkeys' low fecundity, particularly when they are reared intensively or when technologies such as artificial insemination are used<sup>(18)</sup>. Indeed, it is known that ejiao producers have lobbied and continue to lobby the government to subsidize and encourage donkey breeders within China to supply the ejiao market and reduce the shortfall in supply<sup>(3)</sup>. Similarly it is understood that attempts are being made to improve reproduction and production efficiency through the use of artificial insemination and selective breeding<sup>(19)</sup>.

The emergence of such disparity in the supply and demand for donkey skins appears to be fuelling the emerging global trade in donkey skins which is now being reported in all areas of the globe with significant donkey populations. With some estimates of Chinese demand for skins being up to 10 million per annum<sup>(8)</sup> and a reported global supply of 1.8 million per annum, it is clearly evident that the global donkey population is now highly vulnerable to this market.



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“ Production of ejiao is proving to be increasingly mechanised, with all aspects of production from slaughter and skinning through to production of ejiao bars utilising modern technologies. ”

## IMPACT ON DONKEYS IN AFRICA

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Africa's huge donkey population is a key target for the skin trade. The recent history of cooperation between African governments and China – China funded the African Union building<sup>(21)</sup> and there are numerous examples of national trade agreements – has contributed to making China Sub-Saharan Africa's largest export and development partner<sup>(22)</sup>. In 2016 trade to China from Sub-Saharan Africa represented approximately 25% of all trade, compared to just 2.3% in 1985. Reports of trade in donkey skins destined for the Chinese market to make

ejiao are widespread and numerous. Virtually all countries with significant donkey populations are reporting an increase in donkey slaughter for this market. There appear to be two slaughter processes: slaughter in legal, government-led or government-sanctioned slaughterhouses<sup>(23)</sup>; or small-scale 'bush' slaughter, which frequently involves stolen donkeys<sup>(24)</sup>. Whilst donkey skins appear to be the primary product targeted during slaughter, it is also reported that donkey meat may be a lucrative product in its own right<sup>(25)</sup>. Further complicating any understanding

of the trade within Africa are the religious sensitivities which surround the consumption of donkey meat – it is considered 'haram' (forbidden) by the Muslim faith<sup>(6)</sup>. Whilst predominantly Muslim states such as Mali appear to discourage the slaughter of donkeys and marketing of donkey meat and products<sup>(26)</sup>, they are also under the same pressures as other countries to economically exploit the emerging trade market in skins.



## IMPACT ON DONKEYS IN AFRICA

### ILLEGAL SLAUGHTER

#### EGYPT

The illegal slaughter of donkeys in remote areas has been reported throughout Africa. Recent descriptions of the discovery of 250 skinned donkey carcasses in Egypt<sup>(27)</sup> demonstrate the scale of the problem within a country where donkey slaughter for food is normally viewed as culturally unacceptable. Reports in Egypt describe the premium prices paid for donkeys and the significant increase in their price, as well as the benefits of the lucrative market for the 'leather' in China<sup>(28)</sup>. The Egyptian government has recently taken the decision to allow donkey leather to be exported to China for use in 'medicines'<sup>(28)</sup>.

#### TANZANIA

Tanzania has similarly reported mass slaughter of working donkeys stolen overnight from rural villages<sup>(24)</sup>. Community members are being trained in donkey security and are building securely fenced compounds, funded by The Donkey Sanctuary, to protect donkeys at night. Recovered donkey carcasses show that only the skins have been taken, with total discard of the flesh. There are also unconfirmed reports that donkeys in the north of Tanzania are being taken into Kigosi National Game Reserve for slaughter and

skinning as the perpetrators are less likely to get caught within the reserve (Anonymous Personal Communication).

Such practices may indicate just how highly sought after donkey skins are in Tanzania. However, this is a country where donkey meat is already being eaten by certain groups (Anonymous Personal Communication) and mechanised slaughter plants for donkeys are in operation and have received support from local and national governments.

#### SOUTH AFRICA

Animal welfare organisations in South Africa are regularly receiving reports of donkeys slaughtered in rural areas for their skins. The National Council of Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals states that "donkeys are being rounded up / stolen, then transported and brutally slaughtered for their skins"<sup>(29)</sup>. Recent investigations into appalling welfare conditions for donkeys both awaiting transportation and being transported to slaughter for the Chinese skin market have led to successful prosecutions of individuals relating to violation of the Animal Protection Act. A recent case focused on 70 sick, emaciated animals left to starve in Bloemfontein, where the owner stated that "he was only interested in the skins to export to China"<sup>(29)</sup>.



© Photo courtesy of MAWO, Tanzania

All 24 donkeys in a Tanzanian village were stolen, killed and stripped of their skin overnight, leaving the community devastated. In response, The Donkey Sanctuary has helped fund securely fenced compounds to protect donkeys at night.



© Photo courtesy of MAWO, Tanzania

## IMPACT ON DONKEYS IN AFRICA

### GOVERNMENT-APPROVED DONKEY SLAUGHTER

Government-condoned trade in donkey products has been seen in Namibia<sup>(30)</sup>, Botswana<sup>(31)</sup>, Tanzania<sup>(32)</sup> and Kenya<sup>(23)</sup>, with further reports of government-approved donkey slaughterhouses in the Bishoftu and Asela regions.

### ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has the largest donkey population in Africa, with an estimated 7.4 million donkeys. Two large-scale, Chinese-owned and donkey-specific slaughterhouses have been constructed in Debre Zeit (Bishoftu) and Asela, although neither is yet functional. The establishment of both donkey abattoirs is with Ethiopian government cooperation. The government released a statement to the public on the potential of the donkey-skin trade to China but there is still divided opinion and ongoing dialogue among the public as to whether it is a trade opportunity or a threat to poor communities that rely on donkeys. It is likely that in the long term the trade will create social and economic disruption in a country where 83% of people are rural and transportation of commodities relies mainly on donkeys (Anonymous Personal Communication).

### KENYA

Large-scale donkey slaughterhouses are also known to have been established within Kenya, with KSh350 million (£2.7 million) ploughed into the Mogotio abattoir by Chinese investors<sup>(23)</sup>, and the Naivasha donkey slaughterhouse by a local investor. Licensing of donkey slaughterhouses within Kenya has proved divisive due to local taboos surrounding consumption of donkey meat. Such concerns appear to have been overcome only through provision of 'export only' licences<sup>(23)</sup>. It is clear that whilst local and national Kenyan governments may struggle with public opinion of the trade in donkeys, they are attracted by the provision of hundreds of jobs and income from direct and indirect taxes such as the KSh200 to KSh300 (£1.50 to £2.30) per donkey levy paid to the local Nakuru government at slaughter<sup>(33)</sup>. From a purely macroeconomic perspective, the Kenyan government has also reportedly raised export tax on raw hides from 40% to 80% in 2016<sup>(34)</sup>.

### BURKINA FASO

Reports indicate serious infringements by donkey slaughterhouses relating to both welfare and environmental concerns<sup>(35, 36)</sup>. Government reports within the country estimate that, in a six-month period, around 45,000 donkeys from a population of around 1.5 million had been slaughtered<sup>(4)</sup>. Such levels of slaughter, the resulting environmental and welfare infringements and the near doubling in cost of a donkey (£60 in 2014 to £108 in 2016) prompted discussions on regulation of slaughter at government levels and in August 2016 the 'Council of Ministers' banned the export of donkeys and their products<sup>(37)</sup>.

### NIGER

Niger has experienced similar significant difficulties with the scale of the trade, with over 80,000 donkeys being exported in the first nine months of 2016 as compared to 27,000 in the whole of 2015<sup>(21)</sup>. This increase in demand has led to a reported three-to-four-fold increase in the cost of a donkey. Niger's government has taken an even further step and has announced an outright ban on the slaughter of any donkeys<sup>(38)</sup>.

### GHANA

Whilst the trade in donkey skins lacks transparency in some countries, it is more open in others. Reports on market days in Ghana have indicated that skins are being purchased by traders for the equivalent of £97 each (Anonymous Personal Communication). Reports from within Ghana suggest that middlemen slaughter upwards of 200 donkeys daily and that both donkey meat and skins are valuable commodities, with a local market within Ghana for the former<sup>(39)</sup>. Despite this, it has recently been announced by the Director of Veterinary Services that there was "no certified donkey slaughterhouse for public consumption", and "only one permitted to slaughter for hide export"<sup>(40)</sup>.

### OTHER STATES

Trade in donkey products appears to be widespread in many other African states, with reports of slaughter for skins and meat in Botswana, Namibia<sup>(41)</sup> and Nigeria<sup>(42)</sup>, and suspicions of trade in Zimbabwe and Zambia. Trade in donkey meat and skin products appears to be particularly widespread within Nigeria, where donkey meat is traditionally eaten and commands a high price (c. £70 per carcass) and skins command prices of over £100<sup>(42)</sup>.

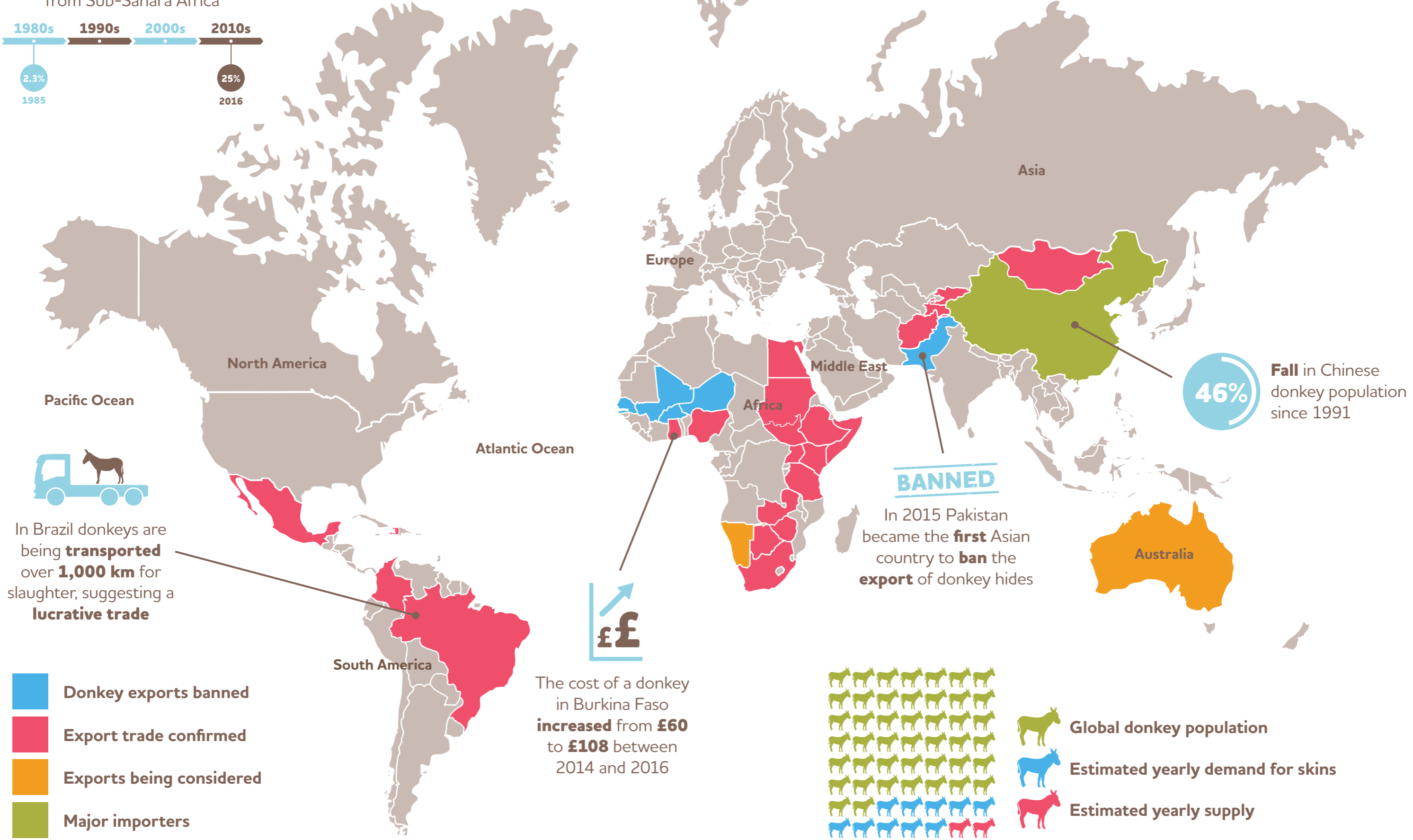
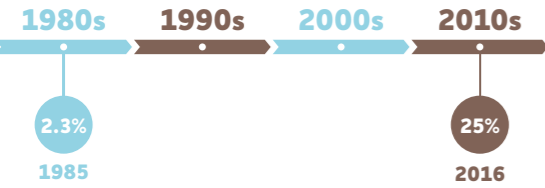
Donkey carcasses smoulder at a government-approved donkey slaughterhouse.





# OVERVIEW OF THE SKIN TRADE: A GLOBAL THREAT TO DONKEY WELFARE

General trade to China  
from Sub-Saharan Africa



- Donkey exports banned
- Export trade confirmed
- Exports being considered
- Major importers



## IMPACT ON DONKEYS IN ASIA

### CHINA

Reports indicate that the donkey population of China has reduced by nearly 50%. Such reductions are likely in part to be driven by the comprehensive harvesting of the population for skins and meat. It also appears that there is a renewed interest in farming donkeys, often in highly intensive systems. It is reported that the premier ejiao producer, Dong'e Ejiao itself, maintains a farm of over 10,000 donkeys farmed primarily for their skins. Within the facility attempts are made to breed larger, quicker-growing animals to provide a product more readily<sup>(3)</sup>. China still reportedly has a population of six million donkeys<sup>(1)</sup> and, whilst many may still be employed in traditional subsistence farming, it is highly unlikely that the population will not be further exploited for the profitable skin and meat market.

### MONGOLIA

China is also known to be encouraging other countries within the region, such as Mongolia, to consider the farming of donkeys for production<sup>(19)</sup>. Mongolia is a country with little history of either working with or rearing donkeys, preferring cattle or horses instead. However, donkey production is increasingly viewed in similar terms to the burgeoning cattle-rearing markets serving the Chinese

appetite for beef, and profits are quoted as being almost double that for rearing cattle<sup>(19)</sup>.

### PAKISTAN

Pakistan is a country with an estimated 4.9 million donkeys. Until recent times it was an important exporter of donkey skins, exporting 200,000 between 2014 and 2016. However, significant concerns were raised about increased donkey slaughter leading to donkey meat being fraudulently sold as beef for public consumption. Such issues of fraud are particularly serious in this majority-Muslim country where the consumption of donkey meat is forbidden. In response to widespread concerns Pakistan was the first country in Asia to ban the export of donkey skins<sup>(43)</sup>, in order to reduce the impact of donkey meat fraudulently entering the human food chain. However, illegal slaughter continues<sup>(56)</sup>.

### KYRGYZSTAN

Lorries of live donkeys are reportedly being exported from Kyrgyzstan to China. Illegal slaughter has existed for some years but this trade has recently been sanctioned through a contract to export 4,000 donkeys to China. Unidentified traders are reportedly paying 10,000 soms (£117) as compared to the local market value of 3,000–4,000 soms (£35–£47)<sup>(62)</sup>.



## IMPACT ON DONKEYS IN AMERICA

### MEXICO

Whilst it is suspected that the Americas provide a significant number of skins to the Chinese market every year, there is little information or evidence for the legal export of donkey skins from this region. However, large numbers of donkeys are being slaughtered in Mexico (sourced from within Mexico and across the border in the USA)<sup>(44)</sup>; donkey meat is favoured by the local market where it is viewed as a delicacy<sup>(5)</sup>. Donkey skins appear advertised for sale from Mexican companies<sup>(45)</sup> but there appears to be no large-scale impact on either the local donkey population or imported donkey numbers at this time<sup>(44)</sup>.

### COLOMBIA

Reports in Colombia document the illegal slaughter of working donkeys<sup>(46)</sup> for their skins, with over 50 donkeys known to have been recently targeted. The discovery of skinned carcasses with flesh left intact has fuelled local suspicions that the skins are being exported. Local police have become so concerned that they have started a campaign in the Sucre region called 'Guard your donkey'.

### BRAZIL

Brazil would appear to be a significant source of donkey skins given the pre-existing export channels for cattle and beef and with a donkey population of one million, including a large feral population in the northeast of the country<sup>(47)</sup>. One particularly suspicious consignment of 137 donkeys was discovered to have travelled over 1,000 km to slaughter, with reports of 14 of these donkeys dying in transit. This raised questions about the destination of the donkeys: unless it is part of the lucrative skins trade, such long-distance transport is not viable because donkey meat is not commonly consumed or prized within Brazil<sup>(48)</sup>. Further information from animal-welfare experts within Brazil would indicate that, whilst not well known, the export of donkey skins to China is regular and significant (Anonymous Personal Communication).



## IMPACT ON FERAL POPULATIONS

### FERAL DONKEY POPULATIONS

Initially, feral donkeys appeared to be attractive targets for traders in donkey skins, with approaches reportedly being made to governments in Australia<sup>(20)</sup> and South America to 'harvest' feral donkeys for their skins. This is perhaps because such populations were regarded as easily exploitable resources with no true owners. Feral donkeys are viewed by many, including some governments, as a nuisance 'alien' species with little positive impact on the local environment, thus making profiting from skin trading (which subsequently reduces feral donkey numbers) an attractive proposition. Whilst there have been unsubstantiated reports from Brazil of the export of donkeys and large numbers of donkey skins, clearer evidence is available

in Australia where it is understood that the government views the export of donkey products to China as warranting further investigation<sup>(20)</sup>. Recent reports from the Northern Territory Government in Australia appears to support the farming of donkeys for the TCM market rather than the targeting of feral populations, stating that "donkey farming is potentially viable as a stand-alone business or as a complimentary (sic) venture operated in conjunction with cattle production". Whether large-scale donkey farming will progress when feral-donkey populations are so abundant within this region remains to be seen. Further information on feral-donkey populations and the pressures they are facing globally is available in The Donkey Sanctuary report 'Feral Donkey Herds'.

## CHALLENGES OF THE TRADE

The trade in donkey skins and meat is a growing global concern in terms of animal welfare, public health and economic, social and cultural stability. These issues are particularly stark in developing countries in which communities have a heavy reliance on donkeys as working animals. Unfortunately the issues are compounded by the global reliance, in particular that of emerging markets such as those in the global south, upon growth fuelled by the Chinese economy<sup>(49)</sup>. Chinese trade negotiations, in particular with African states, have provided legitimate and financially attractive routes for the trade of donkey products, often with significant incomes for governments, middlemen and the powerful elite. Whilst a few may grow rich from the trade in donkey products, there are severe welfare concerns for many of the donkeys slaughtered as a consequence of this trade, and for the impoverished communities that rely upon them as working animals.



## RISKS TO DONKEY WELFARE

The welfare of any donkey both during and at the end of its life is paramount and should be the primary concern, as for any food-producing animal<sup>(5)</sup>. Sadly the welfare of donkeys used to produce skins and meat is frequently reported to be severely compromised<sup>(3, 24, 29)</sup> during sourcing, transport and/or slaughter.

### SOURCING OF DONKEYS

Donkeys destined to provide meat or skin for export to China are sourced in numerous ways. Donkeys may be stolen from owners who care for them well, having recognised their social and economic value. Other feral or privately owned donkeys may be bought at markets by middlemen who seek to profit by collecting consignments of donkeys before selling onwards to legal or illegal slaughter. The stress to the donkeys as a result of being separated from others they have bonded with, and often their caring owners, gathered in unhabituated groups, handled by strangers, and placed in situations that they are ill-equipped to deal with, causes many points at which welfare will be compromised.

Specific challenges are also presented when donkeys are slaughtered simply for their skins, with no value placed on their meat. This helps perpetuate the greater profit that can be obtained from buying sick or weak donkeys at a lower price before onwards sale to slaughter, as the skin will be worth the same as that from a more expensive, healthier animal. Sourcing of such unfit donkeys undoubtedly leads to increased suffering and delayed death. It also discourages owners and dealers from maintaining donkeys with good health and welfare as there is little positive economic reward in keeping donkeys in good body condition and free of disease. Such cases have been reported in South Africa<sup>(29)</sup>, where donkeys were simply left to starve before slaughter as their skins were all that was perceived as valuable and the skin is available whatever the underlying condition of the donkey.

### TRANSPORT

Transport to slaughter is a significant area of concern, with reported cases of large consignments of donkeys in Brazil (Anonymous Personal Communication), Tanzania<sup>(50)</sup> and South Africa<sup>(29)</sup> being stopped with multiple dead or dying donkeys on board; in all cases the donkeys were suspected to be destined for slaughter for the skins trade and little or no consideration was given to their welfare. With many 'middlemen' reportedly buying donkeys in large numbers throughout Africa and other regions, donkeys may change owners multiple times, be sold through intermediate markets and undergo long-distance transportation (such as the 137 donkeys reportedly transported for more than 1,000 km in Brazil). Conditions during transport afford little or no opportunity for donkeys to rest, feed and drink. This is especially true where a skin is the only product of value at the end of the production chain. Legislation against donkey slaughter within certain regions is a generally positive step but governments must be mindful that this may lead to increased welfare infringements and disease transmission through cross-border and long-distance transportation so that traders can access legal markets.

Although unconfirmed, there have been reports of live export of donkeys to China by sea<sup>(57)</sup>. If live transport from Egypt to China went ahead, this would represent over 20 days at sea and additional road transport to and from ports. Donkeys are a very intelligent species and particularly sensitive to the effects of stress. There is a strong risk of a large number of fatalities from subjecting large numbers of animals to the physical and emotional stresses of transport. The World Organisation for Animal Health has published guidelines for the transport of animals by sea<sup>(58)</sup> as one of four priority concerns for animal welfare globally. Although the guidelines are specific regarding technical elements such as the vessel's facilities, record-keeping and loading, they do not specifically cover donkeys and therefore do not address the specific behavioural and emotional difficulties that a donkey may experience.

“ Conditions during transport afford little or no opportunity for donkeys to rest, feed and drink. ”



## SLAUGHTER (LEGAL AND ILLEGAL)

Slaughter of donkeys for their skins and meat takes place in multiple environments, from the backyard slaughter of a single donkey to the large-scale industrialised slaughter of groups sourced by both legal and illegal means. Descriptions of theft and bush slaughter are commonplace<sup>(24, 27, 46)</sup>. Although some slaughter may be undertaken with limited suffering to the donkey, it is very likely that the majority of these killings are hurried, and carried out in inappropriate settings by inexperienced people and within sight or earshot of other donkeys. Recent cases in Tanzania have involved donkeys being herded over 30 km into the bush where they are suspected to have been killed by lethal injection with an unknown substance before being skinned; the rest of the carcass was left in the bush<sup>(50)</sup>.

Whilst regulated, government-sanctioned slaughterhouses may appear to provide better welfare for the donkeys ending their lives, such premises and procedures still present numerous opportunities for their welfare to be compromised<sup>(5)</sup>. Recent video footage promoting the newly opened Goldox slaughterhouse at Chemongoch in Kenya<sup>(51)</sup> shows a modern facility with throughput quoted at 100 donkeys per day. Whilst the plant appears to have modern equipment, welfare concerns are evident in footage showing a donkey being dragged to slaughter by a chain noose before being stunned with a captive bolt stunner. When such poor practice is openly shared, it raises the concern that other poor welfare standards might prevail behind closed doors. New donkey slaughterhouses are increasingly being built and used, in particular in Eastern Africa. Whilst the plants themselves appear to be 'state of the art', conditions for holding the donkeys prior to slaughter and moving animals would appear to be less than satisfactory. For example, The Donkey Sanctuary has been made aware by officials at a Chinese-owned slaughterhouse that donkeys were 'cold water washed' prior to slaughter to reduce blood loss (Anonymous Personal Communication). Such procedures would cause distress to any donkey and whilst possibly improving the skin quality the rationale for preventing blood loss is questionable.

In summary, welfare before and during slaughter is a key area of concern within the emerging donkey-skin and meat trade. Specific areas where welfare concerns may arise include:

- Buying at market from the 'primary' owner, in particular purchase of sick or diseased donkeys that may be unfit for onwards transport or whose suffering should be ended through immediate euthanasia.
- Mixing with other donkeys destined for slaughter in poor facilities with high likelihood of fighting, injury, distress and disease.
- Onwards road transport to legal or illegal slaughterhouses in poorly constructed vehicles which are overcrowded, with little or no access to food and/or water.
- Congregation of donkeys at slaughter premises often without access to food, water or shelter.
- Handling at slaughter and movement of individuals to point of slaughter using inhumane means such as goads and dragging.
- Inappropriate or lack of stunning prior to slaughter.
- Inappropriate slaughter leading to fear and pain before death.

## IMPACT ON REMAINING DONKEYS AND THEIR OWNERS

Whilst the welfare implications for donkeys being slaughtered for their skin and or meat are often plain to see, there are further-reaching welfare implications for working animals. For every working donkey that is sold into the meat and skins trade there is a knock-on effect for other working animals deployed to 'fill the gap'. When donkeys disappear from communities, it is inevitable that the remaining donkeys (or other working animals such as horses, mules and oxen) will have to carry out tasks they are unsuited to (eg too young, heavily pregnant, old or diseased). Where there are no additional working animal resources to fall back on, inevitably it will be the women and children in most communities that fulfil the role of the donkey. The Ethiopian proverb "A woman without a donkey is a donkey herself" effectively summarises this.

## INTENSIFICATION OF DONKEY PRODUCTION

A further worrying trend in the intensive farming of donkeys appears to be emerging, particularly within China. Alongside attempts to intensively farm donkeys are reports of endeavours to breed larger, more quickly-maturing genetic lines<sup>(3)</sup>. When production agriculture intensifies, the welfare of the animals farmed under such conditions rarely, if ever, improves. Welfare concerns for intensively farmed donkeys must be considered as a threat<sup>(52)</sup> and one which should be particularly concerning for those donkeys most highly prized for their skins and with limited value placed upon their flesh.

## ANIMAL WELFARE PROSECUTIONS

Whilst reports exist of prosecutions being successfully brought against those that abuse donkeys destined for the skin trade in South Africa<sup>(53)</sup>, there are few other investigations or prosecutions recorded despite numerous animal-welfare breaches being reported by global media sources. There is an evident and disappointing lack of concern at regional and national levels for the welfare of donkeys and the families and communities they support. This is in despite of ongoing efforts by many organisations to improve understanding of animal sentience and the importance of good welfare.



## RISKS TO LIVELIHOODS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The rapidly emerging market for production donkeys has seen many individuals profit from the sale or theft of donkeys. Some donkey owners may genuinely have benefitted from this new market for their 'produce', but many others are likely to be unaware of the longer-term, devastating effects of this market on donkey prices and sustainable donkey populations.

Such has been the rapid expansion of the market that many families have been unaware of the wider implications of local, national and continental depopulation of donkeys. Communities reliant on donkeys for their livelihoods may lose capacity to produce through their choice to sell on their donkeys, whilst others lose their income overnight through theft of their donkeys which, due to market forces, are subsequently far costlier to replace.

Research has estimated the net economic value of a working equid to be up to \$2,272 (£17.80) per annum in Kenya, with net incomes averaging \$330 (£2.60) per annum per working donkey in Ethiopia<sup>(54)</sup>. These figures, considered over a potential working lifespan of 20 years for a donkey, demonstrate the mismatch between any short-term gain in selling a working animal, and the potential economic value of that animal relating to just one year of work.

It should also be noted that the value of a working donkey cannot be solely reflected in its monetary value; donkeys play a key role in their communities by empowering women, providing freedom for children to study and develop, and as a mechanism for poor communities to save and to self-manage risks.

The importance of the working donkey cannot be overstated. Their valuable contribution to rural livelihoods is increasingly recognised by international bodies such as the UN<sup>(1)</sup> and OIE<sup>(55)</sup>.

### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Environmental concerns surrounding both mechanised and illegal slaughter continue to be raised in a number of countries, with cases of local unrest linked to environmental pollution by slaughter plants being reported in Burkina Faso, Tanzania and Ethiopia. In both Tanzania and Burkina Faso it appears to be concerns relating to environmental contamination<sup>(32, 35)</sup> rather than animal welfare which led to closure of donkey slaughterhouses and consideration of bans on large-scale slaughter. Interestingly such public concerns about potential environmental contamination have been a key issue to be addressed prior to government approval of a donkey slaughterhouse in Namibia. Local residents in Okahandja are being asked for input into an Environmental Impact Assessment relating to a proposed slaughter and processing facility which wishes to serve the export market to China<sup>(30)</sup>.

### DONKEY VISIBILITY IN LEGISLATION

The lack of visibility of the donkey as a species in many governments' legal frameworks leads to a lack of ability to regulate the rapidly emerging slaughter trade. Alongside these national and regional constraints are those of the donkey owners themselves; donkeys are commonly owned by the most resource-limited and vulnerable communities with little voice or access to decision-makers at higher levels. Such marginalisation leaves these communities prone to unethical trading practices, theft and extreme market pricing.



“ The value of a working donkey cannot be solely reflected in its monetary value. Donkeys play a key role in their communities by empowering women, providing freedom for children to study and develop, and as a mechanism for poor communities. ”

## CONCLUSIONS AND OUR WAY FORWARD

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### CONCLUSION

What was once exclusive to ancient emperors has now become a luxury 21st-century product, promoted, sold and delivered on a global scale.

As a consequence, between four and ten million donkeys will need to die every year in order to meet the demand for ejiao – a demand that is unsustainable, whilst simultaneously causing mass-scale suffering to donkeys and risking the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on them.

Rural villages from Africa to South America have had their donkeys stolen, slaughtered and skinned overnight – impoverishing them in an instant and possibly changing their lives forever.

This escalating demand has resulted in a rise in the price of donkeys, making them unaffordable for the families and communities that need them most. The steps taken by countries like Burkina Faso and Niger to ban the slaughter and export of donkeys for this trade underlines their recognition of how much the trade threatens their people and economies.

And this trade, in both its legal and illegal forms, results in a chain of welfare issues for the donkeys at every step, from sourcing to transport and finally to slaughter. These issues can't be ignored – the donkeys' welfare and their real value supporting people's livelihoods is at risk.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Donkey Sanctuary calls for a halt to the trade in donkey skins to produce ejiao until the impact of the trade can be assessed and shown to be both humane for donkeys and sustainable for the communities that depend on them.
- In particular, The Donkey Sanctuary urges other countries affected by this trade to follow the lead taken by Burkina Faso and Niger and ban the slaughter and export of donkeys for their skins.
- The Donkey Sanctuary urges governments and the industry to join us in raising public awareness about the impact of this trade so that ejiao consumers can make an informed choice.
- The Donkey Sanctuary calls on governments and local authorities to join efforts to support affected communities, protecting them from the illegal trade and preventing the decimation of donkeys through the legal trade.



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The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969. The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588), both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU. Linked charities: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).