

The donkey in South Africa: myths and misconceptions

by

Paul Starkey

Introduction

The donkey has played an important role in South Africa's past. At the present time, the donkey continues to provide vital transport and tillage for many rural people, as has been made clear in the previous chapters. The donkey has the potential to make a valuable contribution to new development strategies such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Within rural areas, donkeys are generally highly appreciated, but many people living in towns and cities seem to have a poor view of the donkey. The 'image' of donkeys really needs to be improved if the potential contribution of these animals is to be taken seriously in the new development programmes. For this reason, the 'publicity and media' group of the South African Network of Animal Traction (SANAT) requested material on which it could draw in preparing for a television programme relating to donkeys.

This chapter was developed with this in mind, and it is intended to try to improve the image of donkeys by dispelling some of the myths and misconceptions. Consequently, the manner of presentation is a little more 'enthusiastic' than the reporting style of previous chapters.

Donkeys throughout the world

In many countries in the world donkeys are invaluable to farmers and traders, providing power and transport at low cost. Donkeys are said to have originated in north-east Africa, but have spread throughout the world, thriving mainly in arid and semi-arid areas. There are now over 40 million donkeys world-wide, half in Asia, just over one quarter in Africa and the rest mainly in Latin America.

Donkeys have been used for work for thousands of years. There are pictures of donkeys in the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs and Cleopatra is said to have bathed in the milk of donkeys.

In one story, of common heritage to Jews, Christians and Muslims, Abraham saddled his donkey when travelling to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (in some cultures, this explains the cross on the back of donkeys). There are 82 other biblical references to donkeys, including several where people of high status used donkeys (Clutton-Brock, 1992; BLS, 1994).

Romans used donkeys and mules for pack transport and agriculture. Early Ethiopian documents and art record the use of donkeys. Most cultures have stories relating to donkeys. Mules, derived from donkeys, were important in military campaigns from about 2000 BC until, and including, the first world war.

Numerous travellers in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas have voyaged on donkeys. Donkeys have carried goods and people on

Donkeys waiting with cart in North-West Province



Paul Starkey, Animal Traction Development
Oxgate, 64 Northcourt Ave, Reading RG2 7HQ, UK

their backs, pulled carts, turned mills and irrigation wheels, cultivated fields, guarded sheep and worked in mines. The work achievements of donkeys are famous throughout the world. Donkeys live long (for 'donkeys' years') during which time they can undertake very reliably routine basic tasks ('donkey work').

In many societies in the world, donkeys are mildly ridiculed in conversation and in stories. In appearance their head and ears seem disproportionately large and their voice is frightening, if one does not recognise it, and 'ridiculous' if one does. In most of life, they are mild and obedient, but should they disagree with their owner about what should be done, they are hard to convince (or 'stubborn'). In this way they are more like cats than other easily-dominated domestic animals such as dogs, horses or oxen. It is rare for a person to appreciate being compared with a donkey, and yet they have many characteristics praised by humans. They are extremely patient, hard working, devoted and dependable.

In several parts of the world, donkeys have become associated with the simple and the mundane and even with poverty. In many countries, those with wealth have used horses, camels or oxen for transport, while those with fewer riches have used donkeys (those really poor have had no animals at all). The size and speed of horses made them prized for war, enhancing their image and price. Cattle represent wealth and to own cattle conveys social status. Ownership of donkeys has seldom brought social advantage, except in relatively poor communities, where anything is better than nothing.

Many societies are male-dominated and high-status animals have often been associated with masculinity. Thus in some societies women have had limited access to horses or cattle. As donkeys have seldom been associated with wealth or masculinity, there are fewer gender-related taboos concerning them.

Donkeys in South Africa

Donkeys are indigenous to Africa. Ethiopia, with four million donkeys, is second only to China in donkey numbers. While donkeys have been used for centuries in the horn of Africa, by East African pastoralists and by coastal traders, there are few (if any) reports of long-standing use of donkeys by indigenous South



Statue in Pietersburg in Northern Transvaal commemorating the importance of donkeys in the industrial development of South Africa

African peoples. There is minimal information available on the origin of the present donkeys in South Africa, but the first records of their importation by settlers date from 1656.

Popular donkey power

During the nineteenth century, donkeys became important in agriculture, transport and mining. Mules (produced by crossing donkey jacks with horse mares) were also valuable. One hundred years ago, all sections of society recognised the importance of donkeys in the South African economy (although jokes were probably made at that time, too). Farming books and magazines had articles about donkey husbandry, some rural traders travelled with teams of donkeys and donkey-power was crucial to many mines. The donkey was so important and valuable that some life-size statues of donkeys have been erected in their honour, for example in Pietersburg in Northern Transvaal and Upington in Northern Cape.

Voluntary replacement for some

Although reliable data are not available, there may have been about one million donkeys and mules in work in South Africa earlier this century (AAS, 1994). However, large-scale industries gradually replaced donkeys with engines. Donkeys were used less and less in mining, large-scale farming and long-distance transport. The great importance of donkeys in South Africa, as indicated by their numbers, as well as the dramatic decline in donkey numbers is illustrated in Figure 1.

Animal numbers

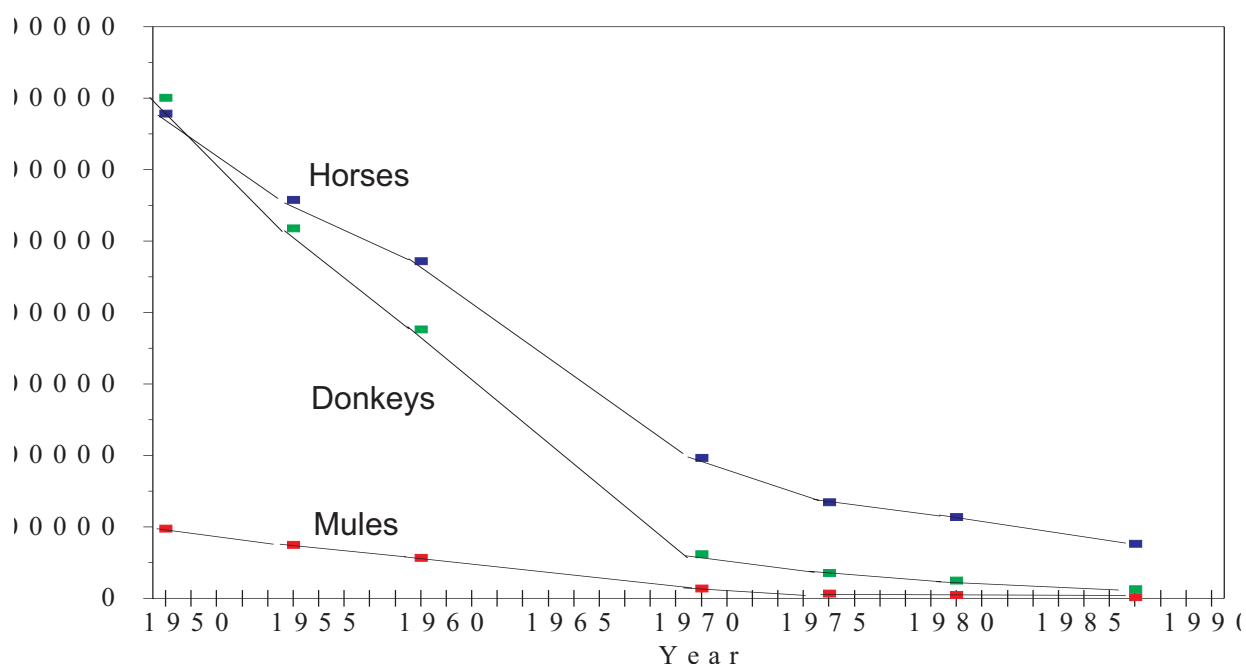


Figure 1: Estimates of horse (top), donkey (middle) and mule (bottom) populations in South Africa during the period 1950-90. Source: Abstract of Agricultural Statistics, Table 65 (AAS, 1994)

use of donkeys in large-scale industries declined, donkeys remained extremely important in small-scale farming and transport. They remain important to this day.

As the more affluent members of South African society stopped using donkeys, their reputation among government officials in the agricultural and educational services started to decline. Articles about donkeys no longer appeared in farming journals, and they were no longer considered farm animals in agricultural syllabuses. Animals that had been taken seriously and acknowledged as important during the first half of the century, started to be ignored and then increasingly vilified during the second half of the century.

Involuntary removal for others

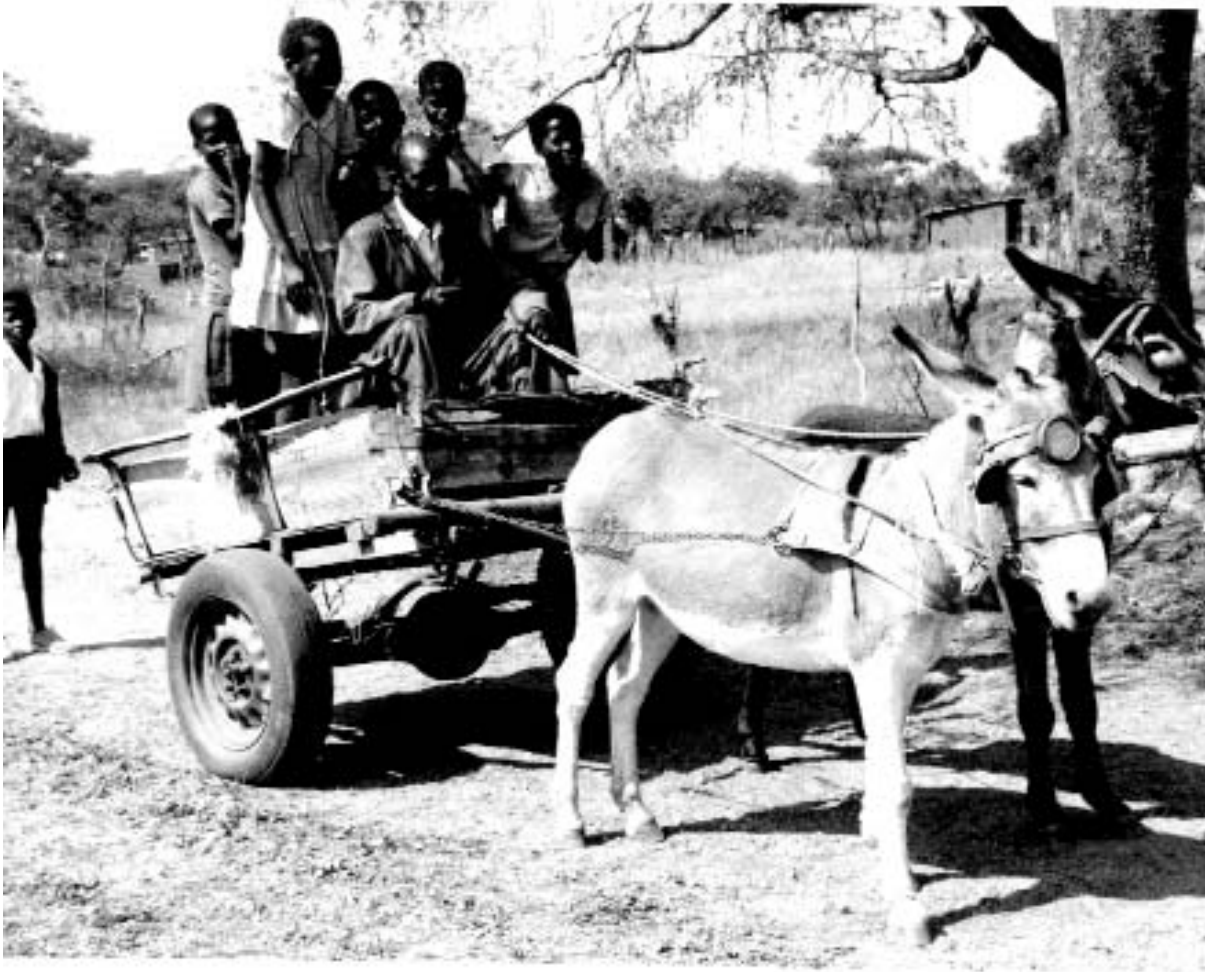
The donkey appears to have been another 'victim' in the socio-political history of South Africa. As the donkey was decreasingly used on large-scale ('white') farms, attempts were made to reduce donkey numbers in the areas of smallholder farming too ('black' and 'coloured' areas). However, the situation was not at all the same: the large-scale farmers disposed of their donkeys voluntarily, because they had new replacement power sources (tractors, trucks and 'bakkies'). For these people, the reduction in

donkeys was a sign of enhanced mechanisation and 'progress'. The small-scale farmers, on the other hand, did not have replacements and so they still needed the donkeys. They did not want to give up their donkeys voluntarily.

Somehow, the authorities started to associate reduction in donkeys *per se* with progress. They started to enforce systematic policies of donkey reduction, even though the people in these areas clearly did not have adequate access to tractors and motorised transport. In some areas donkeys were totally banned (eg, Thaba Nchu) or taxed much more than cattle (eg, Transkei). In some areas, limits were placed on their ownership and many were shot (eg, Bophuthatswana). Some authorities favoured the collection of 'surplus' donkeys, for crocodile farmers or lion parks (eg, KwaNdebele, Lebowa). Attempts at reducing donkey numbers voluntarily (eg, KwaZulu) failed, because farmers still wanted and needed donkeys.

Possible origins of the donkey 'myths'

As authorities continued with policies of reducing or eliminating donkeys, farmers asked why their donkeys had to go. When official explanations (such as, 'they are not necessary') were clearly unacceptable, other 'reasons' were



Children and farmer with locally-made donkey cart in Northern Transvaal. These people were thoroughly convinced of the benefits of donkeys and could not understand why people could be against them (Note the reflector on the donkey harness)

offered, such as 'there are too many donkeys', 'donkeys eat too much and are not productive'. By the 1990s, the donkey, that had once been considered important in South Africa had gained a very poor image. So much so that many teachers and agricultural officers (of all races) started to regard them as pests and vermin. Donkeys were, and still are, often considered as unproductive and harmful animals that need to be controlled or even eliminated. Somehow, urban and peri-urban people have become blind to the present importance of donkeys to rural communities in South Africa.

Over one million people benefit from donkeys in the new South Africa, and many people predict that the number of donkeys will begin to increase again in the coming years. Now, as in the past, donkeys prove invaluable in rural areas as cheap, affordable and sustainable power sources for agriculture and transport that

complement both engine power and human power.

Perpetuation of myths and misconceptions

During the 1994 animal traction survey, one of the more startling observations of the team was the huge difference that existed between what smallholder farmers thought of donkeys and what agricultural officials and students thought of them. The farmers thought they were extremely useful, but the students and officials (of all races) generally thought they were useless.

There were so many 'myths' about donkeys that it appeared there must have been some 'misinformation' in the syllabuses. It appeared that those respondents who believed the worst about donkeys had never actually listened to farmers, to learn how they perceived donkeys. Some of the more common myths and misconceptions heard by the survey team will be discussed in the following sections.

`There are too many donkeys'

During the survey, it was not uncommon for people to say there were 'too many donkeys' in the area. The smallholder farmers did not say this. Indeed, in several areas where 'the authorities' had said there were too many donkeys, the farmers said there were not enough donkeys. It is interesting how such a situation could have come about.

Some of the people who said there were 'too many donkeys' were viewing things from a distance. They were living in or near towns themselves (some were office-based agriculturalists). Such statements were generally based on external impressions: someone could just as well say there were too many cars in Johannesburg or too many houses in Soweto.

Some people were seeing things from a closer viewpoint, but their interests were not those of the small farmer. Even affluent rural people sometimes claimed there were too many donkeys, because they themselves had no need for donkeys (they used tractors and 'bakkies'). These rich rural people (often vocal and influential in their communities) thought the donkeys were a threat to their cars, they competed with their cattle or sheep for grazing, they sometimes raided their gardens and they gave a bad impression to visitors (examples of such interviews included locations in the Western Cape and North-West Province).

The smallholder farmers themselves often reported that they did not own enough animals for their own needs. They reported that there was generally a scarcity of donkeys. If a farmer needs four, six or eight or more donkeys to plow, and only has three donkeys, she, or he, has a shortage of donkey power. Very many farmers had to borrow from neighbours. If one of their animals was sick, or died, they had to travel far to buy a new one. Sometimes farmers simply failed to plow, or to use their carts, because they lacked animals.

National level

Taking the country as a whole, South Africa has the land and resources to sustain many more donkeys. This has already been proved. The national donkey population was very much larger 40 years ago, several times the present size (Fig. 1). It cannot, in fairness, be said there are too many donkeys in South Africa.

Local level

Given the ability of donkeys to survive and reproduce, it is quite possible that donkey populations could become excessive for the carrying capacity of a particular local environment, in which case they would need to be culled. However, there has never been any research carried out on the optimal or maximal population of donkeys in South Africa, or how the environment can sustain the number of donkeys the farmers need.

The survey team found no area in South Africa where there was clearly an excess of donkeys. There were many areas where the 'authorities' claimed there were too many donkeys but in all of these the farmers themselves talked of shortages of donkeys.

Donkey culling

There have been times when the 'authorities' have tried to reduce the numbers of donkeys. In KwaZulu, the 'authorities' told the farmers there were too many donkeys and arranged a big sale. The authorities, convinced that there were far too many donkeys predicted sales of thousands of donkeys. Buyers came in lorries from large distances, ready to buy the donkeys (which would become cheap meat for pet food, zoos, circuses, crocodile farms, even salami). Most lorries went back empty. Only about 30 donkeys were sold that day, because it was *voluntary* and farmers did not want to sell their animals. For the farmers there was not a surplus of donkeys.

Donkey 'massacre'

In 1981 the authorities of Bophuthatswana were convinced there were too many donkeys. They appear to have been under the impression that the donkeys seen in the countryside were largely unnecessary, unowned and unwanted pests. Instead of trying voluntary measures, they instigated a major compulsory 'cull' of donkeys, which turned into a large-scale massacre. Limits were imposed on the number of donkeys that could be owned, particularly the number of reproductively-active ones. Some sources claimed that people were allowed to own up to four donkeys, three castrated males and one female. This may have been the theory but farmers claimed that those implementing the programme were less lenient.

Farmers reported that in some villages all donkeys in sight were rounded up, killed and buried in pits. One of the saddest incidents was

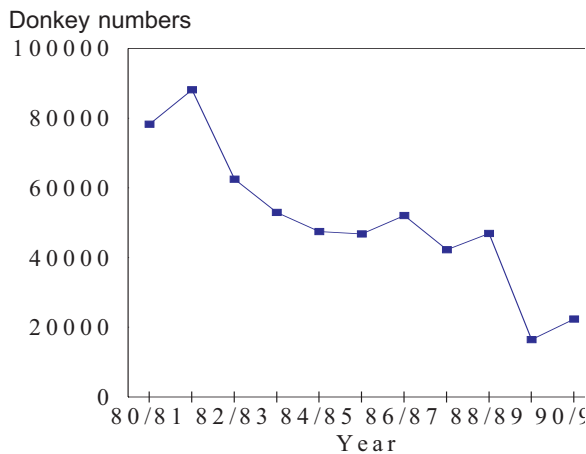


Figure 2: Estimates of donkey numbers in Bophuthatswana for the period 1980-91
Source: DBSA, 1994

of a widow owning a cart pulled by four donkeys. Over-enthusiastic officers stopped their vehicle, got out and shot all four donkeys in their harnesses, leaving the woman stranded and with no source of income.

In some areas the 'massacre' apparently got completely out of hand. There were stories of officials killing donkeys 'on-sight' and even using donkeys on the veld for 'target practice'.

In 1994, farmers reported they were 'still crying' over the incidents. It was said that after the 'massacre' some old people had lost the will to live, having lost their animals and their means of plowing, transport and income.

The 'massacre' certainly helped to reduce the numbers of donkeys (Fig. 2) but it had little, if any, effect on the cattle population, partly because donkey numbers were actually very low compared with the number of cattle (Fig. 3).

Farmers said there was no observable change to the environment in the years following the donkey slaughter—but people suffered as their means of transport and farm power had been removed. None of the farmers contacted believed there had been too many donkeys.

Some people interviewed who had been working for the Bophuthatswana authorities at the time of the 'massacre' still believed they had done the right thing. They had been told there had been 'too many' donkeys and they had no reason to disbelieve it.

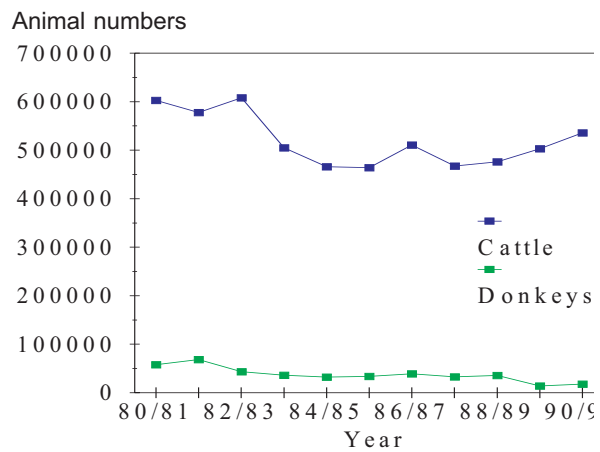


Figure 3: Estimates of cattle and donkey numbers in Bophuthatswana for the period 1980-91
Source: DBSA, 1994

'Donkeys eat more than cattle'

During the recent survey, many agricultural officers and agricultural students used the phrase 'donkeys eat more than cattle'. Farmers did not say this, because it is evidently untrue. Indeed many farmers acknowledged that donkeys ate less, explaining this was why they could survive better than cattle in drought conditions and heavily-stocked areas.

The myth about donkeys eating so much appears to have originated in some agricultural lectures or text books, and has since been perpetuated by members of the agricultural extension service. Most people who reported this myth believed it to be true, without having thought of the implications. When it was suggested, that if donkeys eat more than cattle, then horses (which are bigger) must eat even more, some people objected. No, they stressed, the problem was with donkeys, not with horses. So the myth appears to be based on prejudice against donkeys in particular, and not equines in general.

The reality is quite different. Donkeys being lighter and smaller than cattle eat less food. If it were not so, it is difficult to imagine where all that food would be going. Scientific studies of donkey feed intake have not revealed donkeys to have exceptionally high feed requirements or to be inefficient in use of food (Mueller et al, 1994). Donkey dung is meagre, one doesn't see obese donkeys on the veld and donkeys are not known for rushing around energetically to use up surplus calories.

'Donkeys eat 24 hours a day'

Agricultural officers and students reported to the survey that 'donkeys eat all the time, 24 hours a day'. They claimed they had been taught this. Farmers did not say this, for again it is clearly not true. The same students, when asked, "When you saw a donkey last, what was it doing? And a cow?", tended to say that donkeys they had last seen were working or 'just standing'. They were more likely to remember that it was the cows that were grazing (sometimes sitting, ruminating).

So where did this myth come from? Cattle need time to ruminate and they are seen to sit and chew the cud. Indeed for every hour spent grazing, a cow spends at least one hour ruminating. Donkeys do not ruminate and so they are capable of spending longer on grazing or searching for food. However, they also stay still at times, as part of their energy-saving, drought-surviving strategy. They also sleep.

Donkeys can graze at night if they are out on the veld, but then so can cattle if they are not closely herded. Although studies have not been undertaken in South Africa, research with feral donkeys in the Virgin Islands suggested they grazed for 54% of the time during daylight hours (Rudman, 1990). Other reports suggest that horses may graze up to 16 hours a day, and it seems most improbable from other observations that free-ranging donkeys would exceed this. There are certainly no reports from anywhere in South Africa or elsewhere that 'donkeys eat 24 hours a day'.

'Donkeys are responsible for overgrazing'

Quite a number of people interviewed (particularly desk-bound agriculturalists) thought that donkeys have been responsible for the 'overgrazing' that exists in parts of South Africa. They point to an overgrazed landscape and to donkeys trying to find enough to eat. They suggest the criminals are still there at the site of the crime: the donkeys have been 'caught in the act.'

It is therefore fascinating to listen to what the farmers themselves say. They talk of better days gone by when there was enough land and grazing for their cattle. Then came the droughts. Drought conditions were particularly serious as cattle and the rising human population were increasingly concentrated into small areas ('Bantustans' or 'homelands'). The



Farmer with donkeys in North-West Province. Until the 1950s and 1960s, oxen had been the main work animals in the area. As cattle had become less available for work (due to drought and grazing pressure) donkeys had started to become popular

cattle no longer thrived and many died. There was widespread 'overgrazing' or, as the farmers put it, insufficient land for their cattle to graze. There were therefore not enough oxen to pull carts and to plow. It was then that farmers started to buy and to use more donkeys. The donkeys could survive under drought-prone, eroded conditions that were difficult for cattle.

In other words, the farmers in many areas clearly reported that donkeys were brought in as a *result* of the 'overgrazing'. They were not the *cause*. Drought and too little land for the farmers' cattle was the main cause of overgrazing. Donkeys were not really 'the problem' but one of the farmers' 'solutions' to a problem of which 'overgrazing' was just one sign.

'Donkeys cause erosion'

This myth is linked to the previous one. As noted, donkeys tend to be used most in those areas where cattle do not thrive, the more arid areas and overgrazed regions. They have been brought in as a result of problems signified by overgrazing and erosion.

Humans and any type of land animal can speed up environmental degradation if there are enough of them in an area. The teeth and lips of donkeys allow them to graze close to the ground, so they can remove short vegetation more efficiently than cattle. During droughts, donkeys, along with sheep and goats, can remove most vestiges of vegetation and ground cover. This increases run-off when the rains come. If there are large numbers of any animals (including donkeys), their trampling can accelerate erosion.

In a few parts of the world where wild (feral) donkeys breed unchecked, as in central Australia and Nevada (USA), the effect of their numbers on the environment can give rise to concern. However, farmers seldom allow domestic donkeys to reach the carrying capacity of their environment and the survey found no evidence of feral donkeys in the areas visited. In most of South Africa erosion has been caused by there being too little land for the animals (mainly cattle) that people own, and the donkey is one of the few animals that can survive in eroded landscapes.

'Donkeys poison the ground and kill pastures'

Some agricultural extension workers have told farmers that donkeys had to be destroyed because they 'poisoned the ground and killed the pastures'. It is not clear how such a myth could have arisen (other than by prejudice). Although the urine and dung of donkeys (and horses) differ chemically from those of cattle and sheep, there seems nothing to suggest that they are particularly noxious. In any case this would only be a problem if the animals were heavily concentrated in small paddocks.

Both donkeys and horses tend to defecate in particular places and they themselves then avoid grazing in these areas. Cattle, on the other hand, spread their faeces throughout the pasture; these being looser disappear more quickly than those of equids. Because the deposits are closer together and more persistent, donkey (or horse) dung is more visible than cattle dung, but this should not affect pasture quality.

The teeth and lips of donkeys and horses allow them to graze more selectively than cattle (which rip up plants with their tongues) and in this way they can avoid unpalatable or noxious plants better than cattle. Thus if land is



*Agricultural production using donkeys:
six donkeys plowing in Northern Cape Province*

restricted to just donkeys or horses (and if fields are not rotated or mowed) 'weed' species can increase and pastures can start to deteriorate. This is normally avoided through pasture rotation, by mixed grazing (eg, grazing donkeys or horses together with sheep and/or cattle) and by pasture management (mowing weeds and harrowing away concentrations of dung). However, any possible deterioration in pasture quality specifically attributable to donkeys (or horses) is most unlikely to arise in smallholder farming systems in South Africa where mixed grazing is the norm, and stock are seldom kept in small paddocks.

So again, there seems to be no evidence to support this prejudice. Again, the myth may have arisen because donkeys are mainly seen on poor pastures (if the pasture is good, people may prefer cattle or horses). As already noted, donkeys tend to be kept as the 'result' of degraded pastures: they are not themselves the cause of this.

'Donkeys are non-productive'

Even quite senior livestock officers reported that donkeys were 'non-productive'. For these people, oxen and cows are 'productive' because they produce meat, milk and hides for human consumption or use. These people see that donkey meat is seldom eaten, they produce little milk and no wool and their hides are seldom tanned.

Donkey meat may be a delicacy in Sardinia and it can be a component of salami sausage (even in South Africa). In several parts of Africa (including parts of the Northern Cape Province) donkey meat is consumed, but few people (outside parts of Italy) are likely to think that donkeys could be justified because of their



Boy with donkey cart, Eastern Cape Province.

The donkeys have names and are proudly owned and cherished, as are most donkeys in South Africa

meat. So does that mean donkeys are not 'productive'?

The same question can be asked about tractors—are tractors productive? Of course, people do not eat tractors, but tractors till the soil to produce crops, they carry goods and generally increase the efficiency of human labour. So, with donkeys: they carry water, sometimes saving women several hours a day, time which can be used productively for other things. Donkeys till the soil to produce crops and they carry harvest from the field. They carry goods for trade and people to the clinic and generally save time, increase human production and reduce human drudgery. If one asks any donkey-using farmer whether donkeys are 'non-productive', he or she will laugh, and explain just how valuable donkeys are in rural life.

'Donkeys have no owners or names'

Some people have said that many donkeys in South Africa have no owners, that they had been left in the bush and were effectively wild. It was suggested that anyone could claim a wild donkey for personal use.

In some parts of the world, including Australia and USA, 'feral' populations of abandoned domestic donkeys do exist, but the recent survey found no evidence of this in South Africa. Even in areas where 'authorities' claimed that the donkeys were roaming free and wild, the farmers had a different story.

According to farmers, all donkeys had names and owners. Those donkeys that were used mainly for plowing were sometimes allowed to graze freely when they were not used daily. They might roam far from the homestead and so might appear to be 'wild' by a passing driver, but in reality, these donkeys were owned.

Now, if an official went to a farmer demanding to know whose animal a certain donkey was, people might well answer 'it belongs to no one'. That is because people can be scared of officials. Farmers have learned over the years that 'officials' do not like donkeys. Farmers may be scared of being taxed, or worse, to hear their donkey has been killed by a fast car. In such a case the person might demand several thousand Rand to repair a damaged car (R 500 to replace a broken headlight could be ten times

the cost of a donkey; major repairs could cost more than 100 donkeys).

If a stray donkey has been impounded by the police, few people would dare risk trying to claim it. Fines could well exceed the cost of buying a new donkey. In such cases, no one would want to give away the name of the owner—hence the myth that no one owns the donkeys. If you go to the same village in friendship without a tax demand or repair bill, the farmers can tell you the names of all the donkeys and the people who own them.

In some areas, there are stories of farmers harnessing the nearest available donkey when they want to work, which 'proves' the donkeys have no owners. Talk to the farmers and they will tell you that serious farmers or transporters use their own animals, but if they cannot do so, they may borrow from friends or neighbours. There may be times when, if an animal is tired, they may harness another animal nearby; there are some people who do not respect the rules and may use other people's donkeys without permission. Some people even steal donkeys for their own use (just as others steal cars). Stolen cars have rightful owners and so do stolen donkeys.

'Donkeys cause road accidents'

People cause most accidents by driving cars and trucks too fast and by not supervising animals. The problem that 'donkeys cause road accidents' really has two elements: car speed and free-range grazing. People driving along rural roads should drive at a speed so that they do not hit animals (cattle, kudu, donkeys. . .).

Free-range grazing near roads is almost always due to lack of resources. Donkey owners would prefer to keep their animals in fenced enclosures with adequate grazing, but either there is not sufficient land for the animals, or there is not enough money to erect and maintain fences. If the roads are not properly fenced, one should blame the people, not the animals. It is the responsibility of individuals and communities to control free-ranging animals through fencing, tethering or herding. Furthermore, enforced speed restrictions should take into account the needs of the rural communities as well as vehicle users.

'Donkeys kick and bite'

Donkeys brought up in close contact with humans are mild and placid and can be



Donkeys waiting patiently to be harnessed by one person (working alone) in Northern Cape. Donkeys are extremely easy to manage

controlled by children. Male donkeys are territorial and when they fight each other, or defend themselves from attack, they use their teeth, their hind legs and sometimes their forelegs—they kick and bite. Donkeys may stamp on and even kill small four-legged animals, which partly explains why some North American and South African farmers keep them with sheep to protect them from predators such as coyotes, wild dogs, jackals and caracal. However, as many rural children in South Africa can testify, trained donkeys do not normally kick and bite humans.

'Donkeys are stubborn or stupid'

The myth that donkeys are stupid and stubborn arises from the animal's very calm temperament and certain behaviour patterns. Donkeys are actually highly intelligent and in many countries there are stories of lives being saved by donkeys. Trained donkeys do many things without direct supervision. In a Latin American country, donkeys are sent out from the village in the morning. They descend the hill, they are loaded with water and they return to the village, where the water is off-loaded. They do this four times a day unsupervised and then they go out to graze. They know their routine and it would be extremely difficult to persuade them to do a fifth trip.

In Ethiopia, one person can supervise up to 30 donkeys walking into market 15 km along the main road into the centre of Addis Ababa. The animals can return entirely by themselves. Accidents are very few, for the donkeys know the route and can cope with traffic.

In South Africa, one person working alone can call in his (or her) donkeys, position them, and harness them to a cart (which can be a



*Donkeys waiting patiently as tyre is pumped up, Western Cape.
Donkeys are generally very willing and can display great road sense*

complicated manoeuvre for just one person and four animals). The donkeys can then make their way to the local store without any guidance. Their calmness allows them to cope with the distraction and sudden noises of heavy traffic (where many horses would either refuse or even bolt). Donkeys are certainly not stupid.

Generally donkeys are very willing and very patient. Work that is part of a donkey's normal daily routine is usually undertaken willingly and uncomplainingly. When a donkey is tired it may refuse to work. Beating seldom helps (hence the `stubbornness'). Donkeys appear to have high pain thresholds and are unlikely to be beaten into doing something they do not want to do (horses and oxen can be made to work when exhausted, and can even work themselves to death).

Human encouragement or reward is more likely to work if a donkey refuses (or it may be best to accept that the donkey requires a break). Donkeys and their owners can generally come to an understanding, but if a donkey and an insensitive stranger have a difference of opinion, the donkey may well win. Whether the human or the donkey is more stubborn or stupid in such a case, is open to question.

`Donkeys are expendable`

Some agricultural officers reported that donkeys were regarded as `expendable', and pointed to the very low price for donkeys (often only R 50) as evidence for this. Furthermore, they said that if donkeys were impounded by the police, no one came to collect them, so their `owners' cannot value them. They must think of them as `disposable'.

As already noted, the `unclaimed donkey syndrome' appears mainly due to people being scared of police and possible court cases. As for being expendable, donkeys could only be considered `disposable' if they were easy to buy and replace. In fact, in most parts of the country, farmers say donkeys are difficult to obtain at any price.

Despite the apparent shortage of donkeys, there seems little clear evidence of the normal laws of supply and demand affecting prices. In parts of Transkei, where there was a shortage of donkeys, the price rose to R 200. In Venda, where there was also a shortage of donkeys, a farmer said he would pay R 100 for a donkey, twice the `normal' price (but there were none available). Elsewhere, despite shortages, prices

seldom seem to rise above about R 60, or the price of a reasonable goat. It seems that people like to keep their own donkeys and do not sell them readily. If they do sell them, they appear to keep the price very modest.

Farmers in the area that was formerly 'Bophuthatswana' said that donkeys could work for a generation: if they witnessed a marriage they would still be working when the first grandchildren arrived. In Namaqualand, farmers talked of donkeys working well for 25 years. That is not the life of something disposable or expendable.

'Donkeys never get sick'

This particular 'myth' is unusual as it is in the donkey's favour. Furthermore, it is widely believed by farmers and only disputed by the veterinarians. The story that donkeys never seem to become ill was repeated again and again throughout the recent survey. It seemed that farmers hardly ever had to purchase injections or treatments, although some reported using local 'indigenous' remedies. Indeed they might find it difficult to obtain animal health treatment at a price proportional to the cost of a donkey: many donkeys only cost R 50, and it is difficult to obtain much veterinary attention for such a price.

Certainly donkeys are extremely hardy and resistant to disease, and farmers do not have to spend much money on them, but this does not mean they never get sick. In some areas (eg, Namaqualand and North-West Province) farmers talked of donkeys living up to 25 years. In some other places (eg, Lebowa) farmers spoke of a 10–14 year life. In some neighbouring countries, donkeys are said to live only about eight years. No one seems to know the causes for these differences.

There have not yet been any detailed investigations relating to donkey infections or parasitic agents, or how these may (or may not) interact with work and nutrition. No other domestic animal 'never gets sick' but veterinarians will not be able to establish the basis for this 'myth' until they seriously study the donkey, its work and its environment.

'Farmers want cattle not donkeys'

This final 'myth' is also a truism. If they had good land, many South African farmers would prefer to own cattle rather than donkeys. As noted in the introduction, cattle tend to convey



Farmer in KwaZulu-Natal harnessing donkeys for plowing. The farmer would like oxen and a tractor, but donkeys were affordable and easily-managed. They were the power solution most suited to his existing financial, land and labour resources

status, and they also have some important traditional functions. Farmers would also like to own tractors and a 'bakkie'.

There are some cases where donkeys are superior to cattle (they are almost always easier to manage, better at carrying pack loads and can travel faster pulling a light cart). There are other cases where cattle are better than donkeys (greater strength for pulling, more profitable production, more status and social benefits). Thus many farmers would like to own cattle as their main productive animals, and also have a few donkeys for domestic and on-farm transport (as many large-scale farmers did earlier this century). Quite a number of farmers interviewed regarded cattle and donkeys as complementary and they owned both.

In the real world faced by many smallholder farmers in South Africa, they do not have the resources to own cattle (insufficient capital, lack of reliable, good-quality grazing and/or lack of labour). For these farmers, donkeys are an invaluable power source. Farmers want them.

One farmer in Northern Transvaal said he used to own cattle but they had died due to problems of pasture shortage, pasture quality and drought. Therefore, he now valued donkeys more than oxen. Many other farmers would say the same. In the present circumstances, donkeys are essential. Should farmers find themselves with capital and good pasture, many would concentrate on cattle. Nevertheless, even if cattle were to be widely available, donkeys would continue to have a unique role in rural communities. Donkeys will continue to provide

women and men with cheap and very accessible transport. They may well continue to combine this function with some light tillage on small fields and gardens.

Future of donkeys in South Africa

Donkeys currently play an important role in rural South Africa, for plowing, weeding and transport. Smallholder farmers in most parts of the country thought that this role would *increase* in the coming years. The low cost, longevity and ease of management of donkeys (by men, women or children) makes them very suitable for smallholder farmers. Of course, as South Africa develops, greater use will be made of cars, trucks and tractors, but for the foreseeable future, donkey power will still be very, very important for rural communities.

The donkey needs recognition for its important role. Authorities need to take a positive position and assist in finding ways of using donkeys more efficiently. In areas of environmental

degradation, how can the veld be managed for the maintenance of the number of donkeys people need for their livelihood? Would more efficient harnessing, implements and carts or better feed availability mean that farmers could achieve their work with two donkeys instead of four? How can rural farming communities be helped to have sufficient, secure and easily-accessible grazing land, so that grazing supervision is not a problem for the farmers, and stray animals are kept from the roads? How can the donkeys themselves be assisted and improved, so their own lives are better, and they can more effectively serve the needs of rural people?

There are many myths about donkeys that need to be dispelled, and due recognition needs to be given to an animal that has helped greatly in the past, and will continue to assist the people of the new South Africa.

'There is need to develop a more modern image'

