

Social consequences of introducing donkeys into Zambia

by

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Abstract

The introduction of donkey traction into Zambian small scale farming communities has received a very positive response. The current social and economic difficulties faced by small-scale farmers have made the donkey an important resource in agricultural production. Cattle, which in most areas were the only draft animals, have been affected by many problems in recent years. Many individual households have lost their entire cattle herds because of disease, drought and sale to meet cash needs. The overgrazing effect of donkeys, though not very evident at present due to the low population of donkeys, may become significant with the increase in the population of these animals. This paper looks at the social impact of the use of donkeys in Zambia.

Although the cost of donkeys is relatively high in Zambia (K 100,000 to K 150,000, equivalent to \$70 to \$100), it is still considered a poor person's animal. Some farmers adopt donkeys as complementary to cattle while others as an alternative. Most farmers are not yet acquainted with the feeding, management and care of the donkey. One constraint to the development of donkey use in Zambia is their availability. There is a need to import more donkeys. More activities still have to be carried out to sensitise the farmers in all parts of the country on the economic importance of the donkey. These include more research on the disposal and utilisation of the carcass and by-products and the medicinal value of the milk. More in-service and farmers' training on donkey use is required.

Introduction

The introduction of donkey traction into Zambia has received a positive response. This has been largely attributed to the current socio-economic difficulties faced by small scale farmers including the loss of cattle through drought and disease, the high costs of inputs, high labour costs, the poor state of feeder roads and the poor transport system. The donkey has now become accepted as a low cost source of farm power. However, the number of donkeys in Zambia is still relatively small. In 1995 the population was estimated at

1500 (Mwenya and Bwalya, 1995). These were mainly found in the Gwembe Valley of Southern Province, Sesheke of Western Province and some parts of Central Province (Figure 1). In 1996, 89 donkeys were imported and distributed to projects involved in animal draft power technology in Western, Copperbelt, Eastern and Lusaka Provinces.

Despite the small population of donkeys in the country, there is increasing interest from the farmers in this power source. With the increasing demand for donkeys from the small-scale farmers it becomes important to discuss the repercussions of adopting donkey power. While the use of donkeys has greatly benefited the farmers, it has also had some negative social and economic effects. Since donkey traction technology is new, it is important that farmers understand its socio-economic consequences. These consequences, if not well understood by farmers, may have a long-term significant impact on the development of donkey traction in the country. The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of donkeys on cattle utilisation and the environment.

Figure 1: Zambia showing the provinces where donkeys were distributed



Effect on cattle utilisation

For most small-scale farmers donkey traction has been adopted as a substitute for cattle rather than as a complementary power source. Many individual households have lost their entire cattle herds from diseases, drought and enforced selling to meet cash needs. The donkey is a small animal, with a low draft capacity. Working with donkeys can therefore be much slower than working with cattle. This denies the farmer the time for other socio-economic activities such as attending meetings and other social gatherings. Fielding and Pearson (1992) noted that if women farmers are to help themselves, they need to meet other women farmers. With the economic difficulties that farmers are currently facing, time for other income-generating activities such as carpentry, tailoring, fishing or charcoal burning becomes an important issue.

Environmental effect

Mwenya and Bwalya (1995) reported that there have been reports in Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa of donkeys causing overgrazing and accelerating soil erosion. When not working, donkeys are usually left to forage for themselves. Little attention is given to their effect on the vegetation. Donkeys are known for their ability to uproot grasses resulting in bare ground and the promotion of soil erosion. This can become an economic effect if crop or livestock production in such areas is affected.

Residual value of donkeys

The fact that eating donkey meat in Zambia is almost unheard of has had a negative effect on the adoption of donkeys. Using donkeys is considered less economical as compared to cattle.

Furthermore, the economic value of the culled donkey or of the by-products such as milk have not yet been realised. Even in the countries where the donkey is imported from, it is still considered to have a depreciating economic value. A study by Bwalya et al (1994) says that *"While there seems to be a general agreement on the use of donkeys for draft purposes, in most cases farmers generally prefer using oxen given a choice. It may be that donkeys unlike cattle have a depreciating value which means that at the end of their working life they are left to die and have no residual/resale value. Even the manure from the donkey is rather more fibrous than nutritious"*. It is uneconomic to keep and maintain a donkey which has no more use. Leaving the donkey to die

on its own or killing it is also considered 'cruel' in many societies in Zambia.

Donkeys considered as low status animals

The donkey is commonly considered to be a low status animal. This has a significant impact on the social status of the owner. In Zambia, the cost of donkeys is comparatively high (K 100,000 to K 150,000, equivalent to \$70 to \$100) because of their scarcity. However, they are still regarded as a poor person's animal.

Unlike cattle, donkeys are more suited to women than men because of their small size and docility. The donkey, which is regarded as a low status animal, is often associated with women, further lowering the status of women in society. Fielding and Pearson (1992) observed that regardless of the donkey's technical advantages, women who recognise their own low status in society may be reluctant to be associated with an animal that is also of low status. This also brings fears that even at an international level, the more donkeys are used in Zambia, the more the nation will be considered poor.

Belief that donkeys do not get sick

Donkey power is a new technology in Zambia. Not much is known about the treatment and care of donkeys amongst the farmers or government services. They are never given any supplementary feed and have to depend on communal grazing. There is a general consensus that donkeys never get sick. This belief seems to have come from the southern African countries where the donkeys came from.

In Hammanskraal, South Africa, when people were asked what they did when their donkeys became sick or injured, they said they treated the donkeys themselves, donkeys never get sick, or they did nothing (Wells and Krecek, 1995; Wells, Krecek and Kneale, 2000). Donkeys are usually overworked and not given enough time to graze, this leads to low output. Little is known about the social behaviour of the donkey. It is said to be a very social animal. An interview with an extension officer from Namibia revealed that in times of drought, donkeys are capable of smelling water from distant places.

Social benefits

The introduction of donkeys to the Zambian farming system has had some positive effects. Many farmers find it to be a very friendly animal

and enjoyable to work with. It is easy to train as it has the ability to learn quickly from other donkeys and from human beings. It does not require as much supervision as cattle. This gives the farmer time for other social and economic activities. It is much cheaper to maintain and it has the ability to utilise poor food well. The donkey is much more affordable for the poor farmers. The donkey has proved to be drought tolerant and is not very much affected by most tropical animal diseases.

Conclusions

The benefits of donkey use are difficult to discuss as little has been written on the subject in Zambia. Jones (1990) wrote: “*Even information needed to back the economic arguments about donkey use, ie, about the nature and effects of donkey grazing and browsing, to what extent they compete with or complement the plant use of other animals, and what their manure contributes to soils, is hard to acquire.*” The subject is however vital if donkey traction is to develop in Zambia. As much as the emphasis on the advantages of donkey traction is appreciated, it is also important to discuss the disadvantages. There is need for research on the disposal and utilisation of the carcass and by-products, such as the medicinal value of milk, to raise the value of the animal.

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