



WORKING EQUIDS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION



Contents

1.	
Introduction	4
2.	
Working Equids as Assets for Sustainability	5
3.	
Green Assets: Working Equids in Agriculture and Land Management	6
4.	
Complementary Assets: Working Equids in Urban Management	8
5.	
Recreational Assets: Working Equids in Leisure and Tourism	9
6.	
Working Equid Welfare and Sustainability	11
7.	
EU Legislation and Working Equids: Gaps and Grey Areas	12
8.	
Recommendations	13
References	14

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1.

Introduction

Domesticated to harness their potential as transport and draught power, working Equidae such as horses, donkeys and mules (hereafter referred to as ‘working equids’) have become an integral part of human history and culture.¹ Lessening labour burdens, assisting agricultural productivity and enabling travel, trade and development,² equids demonstrate considerable versatility and can be found in a range of modern-day roles including equestrian sport, tourism, agriculture, forestry and environmental management and as contributors to human wellbeing.

Globally, over 100 million working equids support over 600 million people.³ The total population of equids within the European Union (EU) has been estimated at around seven million,⁴ although such figures are likely to be under representative when considering the potential for discrepancy in data availability and regulatory requirement for reporting between centralised industry, small-scale concerns and private ownership.⁵

The diversity of equid use has given rise to debate on their status for regulatory purposes, both between and within the countries of the EU.⁵ Difficulties in determining accurate population numbers can draw focus towards more readily quantifiable data, such as economic worth, land use or estimated employment⁴ as key indicators for decision makers and away from other contributions such as support for sustainability within lives and livelihoods. Such variation and the diversity of responsible stakeholders, including agricultural ministries, sporting and leisure associations and technical institutes⁵ can therefore affect relevant policy, with greater depth of consideration given to those contexts that are familiar or more accessible to enumerate. For this reason, working equids in particular are often largely overlooked within wider policy.⁶ In turn, this can result in considerable variation in welfare provision and implementation for the same animals across the varied contexts in which they exist.

Noted for their contribution to livelihoods within the 2016 Committee on World Food Security High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) report (and later endorsed within the wider United Nations definition of livestock), working equids represent an accessible and sustainable asset across numerous contexts, contributing to resilience, productivity, economic growth and diversification.⁷ As such, the importance of working equid welfare has gained greater recognition, for example as a priority topic of the second action plan of the World Organisation for Animal Health’s (WOAH) Platform on Animal Welfare for Europe, including the adoption of a specific chapter within the Terrestrial Animal Health Code.⁸ However, beyond the auspices of those already familiar with the roles and value of these animals, both recognition and implementation of welfare provisions require greater attention.

In a time of increased global dialogue about sustainable practice, particularly within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), working equids should be recognised and provided for, not necessarily as an alternative to modern technology to be employed out of context, but as an existing and complementary contributor to sustainable lives and livelihoods within the EU.



2.

Working Equids as Assets for Sustainability

Seeking improvement at scale for the largest recorded populations, the role and welfare of working equids in Low-and-Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) has been documented across multiple platforms by animal protection and international development organisations.^{7, 9} However, this value and versatility can also be seen within the EU, representing a contribution to lives and livelihoods that may otherwise be overlooked or perceived less favourably.¹⁰

Sustainability and the transition into more holistic practices are often associated with agricultural production, land management and environmental concerns. Therefore, although not demonstrating an exhaustive set of examples, these familiar contexts provide a useful space in which to review working equid contributions in the EU.

As a source of draught power, working equids have been noted as a form of renewable energy,⁷ more suited to otherwise unworkable terrain such as mountainous areas or awkward plot structures and causing reduced soil degradation compared to mechanised vehicles.⁵ They are

diverse grazers, solely or within mixed systems, and can facilitate ecological management¹¹ as well as providing useful by-products such as manure¹² within circular systems.

The specific effect that equid species may have on the environment has prompted their consideration as “Green Assets”,⁵ with more positive reported associations than negative. Extending beyond the production sector, leisure and tourism activities such as ecotourism and trekking are hailed for their potential as green alternatives (although it should be noted that, within the tourism sector as a whole, such associations as well as equid welfare perception and experience can vary considerably).¹³

In turn, representing both alternative and complementary measures, the inclusion of working equids within some urban management schemes is further support of their potential within sustainable practice. With a growing focus on holistic approaches to the challenges of global development, diverse and multifunctional contributors such as well-cared-for working equids represent an important part of this progression.



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3.

Green Assets: Working Equids in Agriculture and Land Management

Despite the continued advancement of mechanisation within industry at scale, animal powered systems are still very much a feature of rural life. Although the percentage has decreased over time in Europe, approximately 26% of land area in “developed countries” is managed using animal traction,¹⁴ particularly where non-standard plot structures are unsuitable for mechanised vehicles. Predominantly favoured for their strength and versatility across terrain, the varied contribution of working equids towards sustainable practice is evident within agriculture, horticulture, forestry and environmental management.³

Acknowledged by the European Commission in 2017 for their role in agriculture,¹⁵ working equids can be an apt choice within certain forms of agriculture for a number of reasons. Economically, for small and medium producers the cost implications can be lower than for comparably tasked vehicles,¹⁶ where equipment such as harnessing represents one of the main fixed costs and circular use of by-products can reduce expenditure: producing animal

feed from harvest residue and fertilising crops with manure.

As a source of draught power within agricultural work, working equids also offer precision and reduced environmental degradation: traversing narrow pathways without crop damage, for example within vineyards,¹⁰ minimising detrimental soil compaction / erosion through intermittent and superficial contact¹⁷ and contributing, both directly and indirectly, to ecological biodiversity.⁵

This is also true for forestry management, particularly within protected areas, where both accuracy and minimised land disturbance¹⁰ help to protect the raw materials and ecological function associated with forests. As an alternative to mechanised traction, comparison of the relative environmental effects of classic machines and mules suggests a 74% reduction during felling, limbing and transport by animal traction.¹⁸

Demonstrating both adaptability and efficacy, the value of working equids can be seen through diversification of land use, facilitating access and functionality to space that may otherwise be abandoned.¹⁹ Mountain regions are a key example of this, representing approximately 16% of utilised agricultural area in the EU-27,²⁰ where family farming systems employ animal traction as a physically and economically accessible source of energy.²¹ In such rural contexts, experiencing considerable discrepancies in economy, population and migration compared to urban areas, working equids enable multi-functionality within farming and land management systems, supporting the persistence of lives and livelihoods.¹⁸

The European Commission has identified both agricultural policy and green tourism as important opportunities for the EU equid industry.²² Therefore, representing and adding value to the land through environmental and socioeconomic activity, working equids support and characterise existing acts of sustainable transition.^{5 20}

Agro-ecology and Viticulture, France

Agro-ecological practices can demonstrate great diversity, but share the intention of sustainable production. The study of balanced relationships between plants, animals, people and the environment can allow for adaptation of techniques to suit social, environmental and economic conditions. The inclusion of working equids within viticulture is an example of this, demonstrating the connection between tradition, innovation and collaboration. A recent study, Equivigne, identified several hundred winegrowers across numerous regions of France that use draught horses in their work, with issues such as terrain access and soil health as their main motivators. In addition, while environmental considerations often remain at the forefront, the value of equid physical and emotional intelligence has also been noted as beneficial for the working human-animal relationship, promotion of wider adaptive behaviour and knowledge balance for sustainable system development.²³ Alongside their increased inclusion within vineyard production and maintenance, accompanying developments in education, training and certification within the working horse sector suggest that both *vitipastoralisme* (in its many forms) and the contribution of working animals are regarded as a beneficial within sustainable practice.²⁴





4.

Complementary Assets: Working Equids in Urban Management

Although more frequently seen as a feature of rural life, the role of working equids (particularly horses) within urban management demonstrates how traditional and modern functionality can coexist with environmental, economic and social benefits. Often referred to as “municipal” or “territorial” horses, these working animals are an integral part of public service,^{25 26} collecting waste, transporting people and maintaining natural spaces within towns, particularly where mechanical vehicles cannot gain access.

As seen within the rural context, working equids represent a reduced carbon footprint for activities such as waste management that would usually demand significant fuel input and increase pollutants. In addition, they have the benefit of promoting both waste reduction and increased sorting at source²⁵ through the increased visual and interactive presence of these animal ambassadors during collection. Often trialled as a complementary measure alongside traditional rubbish collections, the use of horses within shorter residential circuits or historical centres has developed considerably and is exemplified as a familiar sight in municipalities across Europe, for example in France,²⁷ Belgium²⁷ and Spain.

The Municipality of Schaerbeek, Belgium

The first municipality in Belgium to incorporate equids into its environmentally friendly aspirations, Schaerbeek has both horses and donkeys that contribute to public services.²⁸ Since 2011, Ardennes horses have been involved in emptying public litterbins, watering flowerbeds and collecting bulky waste from senior citizens. Collecting approximately 200 baskets a day, these animals contribute to environmental management as well as offering opportunities for educational activity and a form of social connection for local people. They also offer a significant saving compared to the use of an equivalent motorised vehicle.

Working on a rotation, with veterinary attention informing any requirement for lighter duties or eventual retirement, the horses are rested regularly and overnight in the Josaphat Park stable. Donkeys also feature in the management of Schaerbeek’s public spaces as gardening assistants, transporting leaves and other materials in place of vehicles.



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5.

Recreational Assets: Working Equids in Leisure and Tourism

Working equids play multiple roles within the tourism industry: acting as transportation to, from and around areas of interest and as an attraction in their own right within particular regions of the EU.

Greece is a prime example of this combined presence, where islands such as Santorini are both home to donkeys and mules used for transport but also well known for this practice. Historically, the topography of the island meant that movement from, for example, the old port to the island's capital, Fira, required using a route of hundreds of steps and working equids, as in many other areas, became invaluable for transporting both people and goods. In modern times, their use has diversified to include tourist transport, for instance by carrying cruise ship passengers along the same routes.²⁹ The donkey taxis of Mijas, Spain, play a similar role in accessing local sights, with mounted or cart rides through the streets.

In addition, although some areas may not be synonymous with equids, they still provide a significant contribution. In Lapland, despite the predisposition of international tourists towards husky drives or reindeer encounters, approximately 150 predominantly Icelandic or Finnhorses are engaged for trail riding due to their reliability and adaptation to the temperature and terrain.³⁰

Tradition, rather than transport, may also influence the presence of equids within tourism. While not necessarily perceived as 'work', the inclusion of a donkey within the *Peropalo* carnival of Villanueva de la Vera, Spain is considered part of the cultural heritage of the annual event.

However, both the sustainability and equid welfare impact of these activities has come under question in recent years. Over-tourism in areas such as Santorini, despite offering economic benefit, has been suggested as surpassing 'carrying capacity', impacting both the physical and sociocultural environment.³¹ Animal welfare has also been the subject of questioning and interventions by numerous animal protection organisations, with injury, husbandry and overwork being key issues.³² Finally, the emerging idea that "cultural heritage" as a social construct is maintained less by inheritance and more by collective construction,³³ has influenced changing perceptions about these roles and how best to balance or reinvent tradition (as formed by historical collective choices) with current understanding and best practice.



The use of horses, donkeys and mules in particular has been subject to re-evaluation through changing “ecological, energy saving and tourism trends”.¹³ As such, a significant contribution of working equids towards sustainable livelihoods and practice now comes from the diversification and evolution of rural tourism and promotion of holistic experiences, to integrate cultural preservation, ecological conversation, wellbeing (for both humans and animals) and economic input. Again, mountain areas provide an example of this value, where trekking and agritourism are becoming more commonplace as “soft roaming” and reduced environmental impact activities, offering natural connections to visiting urban populations while also reinvigorating traditional professions such as harness making.^{5 21} As such, these animals can shape the tourism sector and tourism policy can shape the sector’s animal use.³⁴

Equine Tourism – Diversification and Development

Equine tourism is developing beyond the familiar images of pack or carriage animals and contributing to three key pillars of sustainability: economy, society and environment. Initiatives such as “11 Burros, 11 Destinos” (“11 Donkeys, 11 Destinations”) in Portugal, have utilised the close connection between donkeys, land and cultural heritage to encourage sustainable regional recovery and development in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁵ Studies into equine tourism businesses have illustrated their role in supporting sustainable domestic tourism, gendered entrepreneurship opportunities in rural areas and both cultural preservation and enrichment, such as native breed associated tourism in the Camargue.³⁶ Development of collaborative relationships for environmental sustainability have also resulted from equine tourism, e.g. the French Equestrian Federation (FFE) and National Office of the Forest combining educational and physical provisions to address land use and management.³⁶ In addition, with increased consideration for both animal welfare and immersive rural experiences, concepts such as “slow tourism” emphasising the travel experience as opposed to the destination, (for example, hiking with donkeys as companions rather than solely carriers³⁷), demonstrate how working equids can influence the sector and its sustainable practices.

6.

Working Equid Welfare and Sustainability

One element of sustainability, as seen throughout a variety of existing definitions, is the persistence of activity over a given time period, continuing to provide benefit for individuals or systems.³⁸

Already viewed as a productivity indicator within livestock farming³⁹ and noted as increasingly relevant to human health and wellbeing,⁴⁰ animal health provision and welfare experience can have a significant impact on the contributions of working equids to lives and livelihoods, with poor welfare having a disproportionate and negative effect.⁴¹

Therefore, when considering their role within sustainable practice it is also important to consider the sustainability of their contribution, including potential detriment to the animal themselves and their ability to undertake contextual tasks.

A number of welfare issues have been identified for working equids, both within the EU and globally, including injury and poor physical health, unsuitable provision of resources (food, water, housing etc), working hours, use of harmful practices and inappropriate handling methods.^{42 43}

Owner knowledge, perceived importance of certain health and welfare considerations and access to relevant advice and services such as veterinary practitioners play a significant part in the experience of equids across the EU.⁴

Local interventions, NGO educational programmes, as well as service provision⁴ and informative resources such as the WOAHS Standards (Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Chapter 7.12) and good practice guidelines such as those produced by the Voluntary Initiative on responsible ownership and care of Equidae under the EU Platform on Animal Welfare⁴⁴ go some way to redressing the balance of knowledge.

However, both awareness of and access to such sources of information or initiatives can be a hindrance to positive welfare experience, as well as the availability or consistent implementation and enforcement of relevant equid welfare legislation. Such circumstances can emphasise the imbalance that exists between the value and contribution of working animals to sustainable human livelihoods and the recognition and provision they are given for their 'worth' as assets.¹³

Factor Influencing Welfare	Welfare Consequence	Prevention / Mitigation
Work duration	Exhaustion, infrequent access to food / water / shelter, physical and mental stress	Appropriate work, schedule and duration for size and age, as well as ambient conditions
Heavy loads	Injuries, lameness	Appropriate loads for age, physical capacity and context
Uneven / hard surfaces	Lameness	Hoof care and appropriate trimming / shoeing
Harness and related equipment (poor design or fit)	Sores and lesions	Initial fitting, maintenance of equipment and use of preventative measures for abrasion
Inappropriate or aversive handling	Increased fear of humans or environments, stress, apathy	Training of owners / handlers / supporting workers
Poor quality feeding	Nutritional deficit and physiological disorders, reduced performance	Appropriate diet (including relevant supplementation where required)
Transport	Injuries, fatigue, dehydration, heat stress, other environmentally derived stress	Appropriate transport conditions

Adapted from Table 1 – “The main factors negatively affecting the welfare of draught animals”¹²



7.

EU Legislation and Working Equids: Gaps and Grey Areas

The European Union has established a wide range of legislative provisions concerning animal welfare. Animal sentience is recognised under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 13)⁴⁵ and therefore, both the EU as a body and its Member States must pay due regard to their welfare requirements. Represented within directives and regulations, welfare requirements can be transposed into national legal systems or directly applicable to citizens and businesses. Dependent on policy integration and enforcement by Member States, this inclusivity indicates proactive protection for animal welfare.

Within these legislative provisions, although contexts such as transport or sport may prompt additional specific references, there are three main categories for Equidae in the EU: those intended for slaughter, those not intended for slaughter (which includes all kept equine animals) and registered equine animals, which exist as a sub category with the application of additional contextually driven health and welfare conditions.⁴⁶

However, equids (and working equids in particular) are a strong example of how this broad categorisation can fall short in its protection of animals that have, and continue to, feature in such a diverse breadth of human agriculture, industry and culture.⁴⁷

Firstly, the definition of equids and their subsequent inclusion or exclusion from contextual legislation, for example as farm or companion animals, can affect the provision and protection they are afforded. Where working equids are not specifically recognised or included, they may not receive sufficient specialist welfare consideration relating to their utility.⁴ Essentially, they may fall into legislative gaps and grey areas, moving in and out of relevant scope throughout their lifetime.

In addition, implementation and enforcement of relevant EU legislation can vary considerably between countries, including assessments undertaken by competent authorities, welfare standard disparity and provision of services to accommodate welfare need. Removing the Blinks: The Health and Welfare of European Equidae in 2015, a report by World Horse Welfare and Eurogroup for Animals⁴ highlights such discrepancies, particularly the variable recognition of equids in agricultural contexts, alongside welfare risk factors such as knowledge gaps, neglect, perceived economic value and traceability.

Finally, although non-mandatory advice and guideline documents may be updated in a timely manner by external bodies to reflect the latest scientific findings concerning equid welfare,⁴⁸ due to priority and protocol, this is not necessarily the case for legislation. As such, while generalised animal welfare laws and contextual references can provide some protection, there is a risk of measures being outdated or inappropriate for the specific needs of working equids.

8.

Recommendations

- 1 Include animal welfare criteriaⁱ if working equids are used in activities related to addressing climate change, protecting natural resources and preserving biodiversity through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and in the CAP Plans.ⁱⁱ
- 2 Include animal welfare criteria if working equids are used in activities related to implementation of the EU Forest Strategyⁱⁱⁱ and fostering sustainable forestry through the CAP.
- 3 Recognise the role of working equids in greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy, more social and inclusive Europe, as part of current and upcoming EU Cohesion Policy.^{iv}
- 4 Recognise the role of working equids in fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories.
- 5 Include animal welfare criteria if working equids are used in activities directly or indirectly funded by European Union institutions.
- 6 Include animal welfare criteria if working equids are used in tourist activities, including development of guidance for businesses and licencing authorities and, where applicable, while promoting EU tourism through political frameworks.^v
- 7 Ensure the inclusion of working equid welfare within implementation of the European Green Deal,^{vi} including the EU Forest Strategy,^{vii} forest-based economy and ecotourism, and Environment action programme to 2030,^{viii} in particular when protecting, preserving and restoring biodiversity, and enhancing natural capital.
- 8 Enact provisions detailing minimum requirements within the revised animal welfare legislation, especially the Kept Animals Regulation, to ensure the welfare of working equids is protected by the legislation.

ⁱ The animal welfare criteria should encompass the Five Domains and align with upcoming EU requirements on animal welfare.

ⁱⁱ The current Common Agricultural Policy covers the period 2023-2027.

ⁱⁱⁱ Commission (EU) 'New EU Forest Strategy for 2030' (Communication) COM(2021) 572 final, 16 July 2021.

^{iv} The Cohesion policy is a legislative package that aims to ensure the 'overall harmonious development' of Member States and regions. The current policy covers the period 2021-2017.

^v Commission (EU) 'Europe, the world's No. 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe' (Communication) COM(2010) 352 final, 30 June 2010.

^{vi} Commission (EU) 'The European Green Deal' (Communication) COM(2019) 640 final, 11 December 2019.

^{vii} Commission (EU) 'New EU Forest Strategy for 2030' (Communication) COM(2021) 572 final, 16 July 2021.

^{viii} Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030.

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