



After a day's work the animals are kept in the kiln, surrounded by brick and on a brick-lined floor without any bedding.



A blind donkey loaded up with a pannier of bricks weighing about 80kg. Donkeys have replaced humans as carriers.



A sick and emaciated donkey.

NEPAL'S BLOOD BRICKS DONKEYS

During my month in Nepal working for Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust (HART), I was invited to attend an equine welfare convergence meeting, which was hosted by the Animal Health Training and Consultancy Service of Nepal.

I had discovered just before arriving in Kathmandu that not only would I be expected to say a few words at the gathering, but a PowerPoint presentation might be anticipated. With just a few hours preparation time, HART director Khageshwar Sharma and I managed to put together a short paper on Equine welfare from a UK perspective, which I think was just about okay.

However, undoubtedly the presentation that made the most impact was one entitled Blood bricks, by Sudeep Koirala from Animal Nepal and the Donkey Sanctuary in Kathmandu. It was a truly horrifying story of abuse of donkeys and mules in the brick kilns around Kathmandu. I felt I just had to make time to visit the donkey sanctuary and a brick kiln to see for myself.

Between 125 to 200 brick kilns are found in and around Kathmandu and many operate illegally. No government moni-

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is shown the plight of Nepal's donkeys, used as beasts of burden in the brick-making industry

toring exists and many move annually. Around 40 of these kilns use mostly donkeys and mules, but some ponies are employed as well. Animals have only been introduced in the past five years due to the lack of human labour.

Child labour

Brick making is a very polluting industry, which causes around 30 per cent of the air pollution in the Kathmandu valley. It is awful, and if you are in Kathmandu for any length of time without some form of face mask then you will have a sore throat and cough, and if, like me, you are prone to asthma you will become short of breath. All the kilns employ child and bonded labour, and use traditional systems of brick production without any attempt to reduce air pollution.

The donkeys are used to transport bricks. They have loads of around 45 bricks at a time, mostly using home-made panniers and saddles. It means every

animal carries about 80kg each journey. I am told around 1,500 equines work in this way in the Kathmandu valley alone.

The animals owners come from Nepalgunj, which is in the south, on the border with India. The equines are bought at horse and donkey fairs in India. Owners prefer to buy leftover animals and females to save money, and they are then often smuggled illegally over the border in very decrepit transport.

They may be abandoned, unfed and uncared for until they are rounded up at the start of the brick-making season in the winter months.

The animals face constant beatings, often by children who are pressurised by overseers to work faster and longer. Donkeys and mules are overloaded and overworked. There is often a complete lack of medical care. Water is only available occasionally and the handlers and owners have little concept of

the nutritional needs, including roughage, that an equine needs to be healthy.

A very poignant moment occurred during my visit to one kiln. An owner drew a bucket of water from a well and proceeded to wash his face and hands. A very thin mule wandered over desperate for drink and was shooed away.

After the day's work is finished, the animals are kept in the kiln, surrounded by brick and on a brick-lined floor without any bedding.

Apart from the working conditions, bad ill-fitting harnesses cause awful pressure sores that the animals still have to endure while working. Hoof and foot problems are very common, but the animals are still forced to work as are heavily pregnant mares.

Gastric problems and colic are common due to the poor diet starving animals will attempt to eat almost anything, including plastic, rope and sand. Skin infections are seen on most animals due to the all-pervading brick dust. Dust is also the main cause of respiratory and eye infections and blindness. Due to the tendency to buy and work

pregnant females, miscarriages and dead foals are common. The sanctuary has had awful situations to cope with, including 38 donkeys at one site that died suddenly over a week with severe dehydration, the cause of which was unknown only 15 animals survived. Last season, Animal Nepal treated more than 500 animals.

Animal Nepal and Lucia de Vries, a freelance journalist and consultant for Animal Nepal, invited me to the donkey sanctuary at Godaveri and then to a brick factory. There were only 12 donkeys and two mules in the sanctuary when I visited, as the brick-making season runs from November to May. Soon it will be packed to capacity and over.

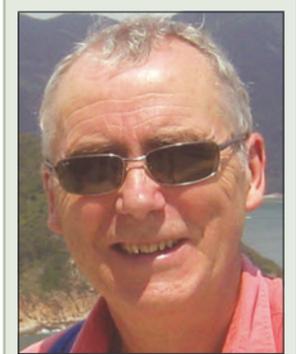
Making an impact

Vets from the sanctuary look after 12 to 15 kilns in their area and provide a 24-hour service. They make up first-aid boxes for every kiln and visit two or three times per week. They have an outreach programme to educate handlers and demonstrate there is a better way to treat the equines than battering and overworking them to an early death. Very few donkeys survive fit enough to work for two seasons in the kilns.

Animal Nepal and the donkey sanctuary have also provided hoof picks and extra padding to the saddles, which I saw being used to good effect in the kiln I visited. They rescue ill and handicapped animals and nurse them back to health where possible, and have an active donkey adoption system. Lucia also spends a lot of time lobbying kiln owners and government officials to try to improve the conditions under which the animals live and work, but it is an uphill job and there is no animal welfare legislation in Nepal to prevent the ill-use and abuse of animals.

But Animal Nepal and the sanctuary are making an impact. Health conditions in the Lalitpur district have improved greatly, but there is much more to be done. Many equine owners now understand and provide better food, water and medical care.

Some kiln owners are begin-



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ning to feel the heat of the constant lobbying, and one owner has stopped employing children and animals completely.

Finally, and very importantly, Animal Nepal has introduced a certificate system for every brick produced. Bricks are classified as red, orange and green. Red are the blood bricks produced in the very worst conditions for the animals and the environment. The aim is to make buyers aware the difference between these and the clean green bricks as the groups recognise that only consumer power can bring about a lasting change and stop the awful exploitation and cruelty of donkeys, mules and ponies in the brick kilns around Kathmandu and district.

Acknowledgement

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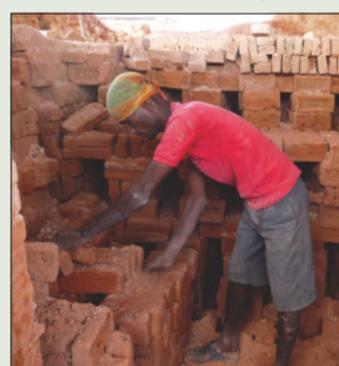
The donkeys' overnight accommodation is on the premises.



General view of the sanctuary in Kathmandu.



Ill-fitting harnesses can cause awful pressure sores, which the animals endure while working.



Getting the new bricks out of the kiln ready to load on to the donkey.



Hoof and foot problems are common, but the animals must still work.