



Guidance for competent authorities and tourism operators to ensure the welfare of working equids in tourism

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1. Introduction

In the European Union (EU), the total population of equines has been estimated at seven million animals¹. However, as there is limited data available, this figure is likely to be an underestimate. Working equidsⁱ are employed in the tourism industry in the European Union and around the world. A non-exhaustive list of equestrian tourism activities includes horse-drawn carriages, donkey and pony trekking, ponies in fairs, animal farms, temporary riding facilities and petting zoos.

In many holiday destinations, working equids are employed in tourist activities such as rides, treks and tours². In some locations, working equids are a factor for tourists in choosing to visit^{3,4}. In many cities in Europe, horse-drawn carriages are viewed as tourist attractions⁵. However, in some regions such as Hydra island in Greece, equids are the only means of transport locally available.

Working equids normally fall outside legislation intended for agricultural or companion animals, which can place their welfare at risk⁶.

We acknowledge the guidance provided by Chapter 7.12 Welfare of Working Equids of the OIE Terrestrial Code⁷ and the two Guides to good animal welfare practices for the keeping, care, training and use of horses⁸, and donkeys and their hybrids⁹. These latter guides were developed by the EU Platform on Animal Welfare Voluntary Initiative on Responsible Ownership and Care of Equidae. However, we recognise the specific welfare issues affecting equids used in tourism and the need for specific guidance for this category of working equids.

Acknowledging that horses, donkeys and mules are in use for tourism activities, this guidance, addressed to competent authorities and equine tourism operators, aims to raise awareness of the need for their welfare to be protected. It is envisaged that there will be a separate guidance for tourists/users.

This document does not intend to be a legal document. We acknowledge that there are ordinances through the EU addressing the welfare of working equids used in tourism that could be more restrictive. This guideline presents recommended minimum welfare standards, especially intended for those locations with limited rules or ordinances to protect the welfare and health of working equids used in tourism.

ⁱ Horses, donkeys and mules.

2. Main welfare issues for working equids in tourism

It is possible to find ethical and humane equine use for touristic activities and services, where the welfare of the animals is protected¹⁰. However, some factors may put the health and welfare of the animals at risk and may result in lameness, dehydration, malnutrition, injuries, disease, fear, stereotypies and exhaustion^{6,11}. Such factors include insufficient training, inappropriate husbandry and insufficient professional care, heavy loads and extreme weather conditions and environmental pollution.

- **Insufficient training of keepers and handlers**: In the absence of adequate information and professional guidance, there may be a negative impact on animal welfare. For example, tourists lacking riding and/or handling experience may adopt inappropriate riding positions and incorrectly handle animals, placing their and the equine's health and safety at risk when riding unattended or without adequate supervision.
- **Inappropriate husbandry and insufficient professional care** may lead to injuries or illness of either a physical or mental nature. In addition, insufficient professional service, such as trained veterinarians and farriers¹², may lead to the animal suffering². The following factors may impact on equine health and welfare:
 - **Hoof care-related issues** may arise if animals do not receive hoof care appropriate to the terrain in which they work from a professional and if equids do not have regular access to pastures and/or appropriate nutrition. Animals may suffer from hoof damage, pain and lameness. Moreover, farriery practices may be embedded in traditions from the past that may not integrate recent research, posing a further risk to equine welfare¹².
 - **Injuries** may occur for many reasons. For instance, wounds may appear when tack or harness is not correctly fitted to the animal's anatomy for the task to be performed, or if equipment is not properly maintained. Exceptionally, injuries may arise due to physical violence.
 - **Unfitness to work** may be an issue if equids are overworked or are not given adequate rest during the working day, or during the week. This increases the risk of suffering. In addition, some equids start working at young ages, before their musculoskeletal system has properly matured⁶.
- **Heavy loads**: Working equids may be required to carry loads (a person or items) heavier than they are able to cope with and above recommended limits. Heavy loads may compromise animals' health⁶, causing stress, injuries and fractures¹³.
- **Extreme weather conditions and environmental pollution**: Working equids may be exposed to a wide range of temperatures and humidity levels. Horses are particularly sensitive to heat stress if exposed to high temperatures, which can lead to dehydration. In addition, high humidity may hinder their ability to properly cool themselves, with risk of overheating. Moreover, extreme cold temperatures may have detrimental effects on their health. Donkeys are also sensitive to rain and humidity. In addition, environmental and noise pollution, although difficult to address, may put equine, as well as human, health and welfare at risk, especially in urban and highly populated areas.

3. Recommendationsⁱⁱ

Having highlighted the main factors posing a risk to equine welfare, minimum requirements should be ensured by competent authorities and tourism operators. It should be noted that the welfare of equids should be ensured before, during and after their 'working life'. Therefore, the financial costs to cover appropriate care and health needs of the animals should be included into any economic assessment.



Knowledge of handlers, veterinarians, farriers and other professionals

One of the main factors affecting working equids' health and welfare relates to the knowledge of animal keepers, handlers and owners in relation to equine behaviour, physical needs and methods of handling. Education in handling equids is essential. Persons involved with these animals should have an understanding of the impact of bad practices and be aware that they can make their activity more sustainable by improving equids' welfare and health¹⁴. Importantly, handlers should have species-specific knowledge of animals under their care. For example, handlers should understand the critical differences between horses, mules and donkeys, and the differences in the way these animals should be cared for.

In addition, working equids should be regularly examined by veterinarians, either employed by the tourism operator or externally contracted, who have the appropriate equine

ⁱⁱ Unless specified, these recommendations apply to horses, donkeys and mules.

knowledge^{15,16}. Moreover, injured equids should be examined by a veterinarian to ensure proper treatment.

Hoof care, trimming and dental checks should be performed by professionals who have adequate knowledge to ensure the animal's welfare.

Health and welfare

Animals should be maintained in a good state of health and welfare. They should be fit to undertake their work in line with the Five Domains¹⁷ without putting their health or welfare at risk. Any equid that is ill or injured should be withdrawn from their tasks to be treated by a qualified professional, and only permitted to return to duties once fully recovered¹⁴.

Age and condition

The individual fitness of equids to perform expected work should be taken into account. In general, the minimum age for equids to work should be 4 years of age. Before that age, equids are not yet in the mature phase of physical development^{13,14,18}. Elderly equids, over approximately 20 years-old, should not be used in touristic activities¹³. Individual fitness assessment should be performed on a case-by-case basis, as breed and expected use of the animal may affect potential risks and recommendations. The same applies to pregnant mares during the last 3 months of gestation, and mares that have foaled within the last 3 months^{14,15,16}. In addition, foals and young equids up to 1 year of age should not be present alongside the mare during working time¹⁴.

Hoof care

Equids should have their hooves trimmed and, if relevant, shoes renewed every 6 to 8 weeks, to avoid injuries and to ensure their feet are properly balanced and move comfortably¹⁹. The person that performs hoof care should be properly trained. In addition to appropriate nutrition, equids should, whenever possible, be given access to daily turnout onto soft surfaces, such as sand or pasture, to help maintain healthy hooves, avoiding additional health issues²⁰.

Tack and gear

Clean and dry tack and equipment should fit the animal correctly and not cause distress or injury. In addition, for improved comfort, the equipment, including mouth bits, should be removed during resting and, ideally, during feeding and watering periods¹⁶. Equipment and practices harmful for equids should not be used.

Working hours and short breaks

Only equids fit to work should be permitted to work, limited to a maximum of 6 days a week, for a maximum of 8 hours per day, excluding resting periods¹⁴. Equids should have breaks at least every 4 hours of work, for a minimum of 30 minutes, to be fed, watered and rested while protected from weather and other adverse conditions such as proximity with excessive noise, whenever possible. Equid working hours should avoid the hottest or coldest part of the day if the temperature may put their health and welfare at risk. Animals should be able to rest between working periods, ideally with their tack or harness removed¹⁶.

The operator should ensure there is a sufficient number of animals to cover the total working hours, with animals working shifts as required¹⁸.

Feeding and watering

Working equids should have access to clean drinking water¹⁶ at least every 4 hours. In addition, feed provided should be adequate in quality and amount and adapted to each species and type of work. Where possible, and especially during resting periods, when animals are not working, the feeding routine should encourage natural behaviour such as foraging, browsing and grazing¹⁵.

Environmental and climate conditions

When appropriate, operators should avoid the hottest or coldest part of the day¹⁰, to avoid heat or cold stress. Equids should not work when the environmental temperature exceeds 35°C. Where possible, working equids should have access to natural or man-made shelters in order to reduce the impact of extreme weather conditions⁷. During resting periods, in locations with high temperatures, animals should have access to a location with shade¹⁵ and ventilation.

To avoid injuries, the terrain where equids work should be monitored for hazards such as waste and tree branches²¹.



Weight loads

The maximum percentage of body weight an equid should carry depends on circumstances, for example, equid age, amount of time the equid will carry the load, ground slope, ground conditions underfoot and weather conditions. Equids should be individually assessed to determine the maximum weight they can carry^{17,22}. This threshold should be determined by such factors as the animal's size, body condition and fitness. As a general rule, horses should not carry more than 20% of their body weight, with consideration given to the intensity and duration of effort²². Above this threshold, the horse could be more affected and

display tension and hardening. Donkeys and mules should not carry more than 33% of their body weight, with consideration given to the intensity and duration of effort²². As riding equines while they also pull an additional load may represent an additional risk both to human and equine welfare, additional care should be exercised if this is being considered.

With regards to carriage load, attention should be given to the type of terrain and the balance of the carriage and the load.

Management outside working hours

Outside working hoursⁱⁱⁱ, accommodation available should be safe, protect equids from the elements and provide adequate ventilation. Shelters should be comfortable, clean¹⁷ and hygienic, with biosecurity measures in place¹⁴. The space should be free of excessive noise. The accommodation design should ensure that animals can lie down to rest at the same time. A person should visit the premises at least twice daily to check the premises and the animals and ensure that animals have access to water and feed.

During these periods, the equipment used when working should be removed from equids¹⁶. Equids are social animals and should not be left alone; equids should have other compatible equid/s for company, ideally of the same equid species.

Where possible, working equids should have access to pasture daily, ideally in the company of other equids. On pasture, equids should have free access to shelter¹⁶ to avoid extreme weather conditions (including heat and cold stress, rain), and when possible in a quiet environment.

Tethering should be strongly discouraged and equids should not be hobbled. If tethering cannot be avoided, appropriate equipment should be used to safeguard the health of the animal e.g. padded materials⁷. If tethered, the animal should be able to walk, lie down and stand up without tensing the tether, and easily access food, water and shade.

Training

Working equids should be appropriately trained and allowed to build experience over time¹⁶. Techniques used should be based on appropriate positive and where necessary negative reinforcement^{15,17} and never punishment. Trainers should not use techniques that put equine health and welfare at risk.

Transportation

As transportation by vehicle is a stressful experience for equids, journey length should be as short as possible. In order for equids to be safely transported from their premises of rest to the work location, the animals should be trained to load and unload confidently in various situations and habituated to the type of vehicle. Vehicles should comply with transport requirements^{17,24} and not jeopardise equine welfare.

People handling equines during loading and unloading should have the appropriate experience to perform these tasks. In addition, vehicle drivers should have a Certificate of Competence¹⁷ to transport equines, as inappropriate driving may negatively impact animal welfare during transport.

ⁱⁱⁱ Working hours in this context includes short breaks during the working day. This section of the guidance does not apply to these short breaks.



Retirement

Equid welfare should be protected even when animals are retired from their working career. The responsibility of the keeper does not cease and equids should not be abandoned or neglected. If the animal should be killed, measures should be in place to avoid suffering⁷.

Licensing and registration

Tourism operators should have a permit or authorisation to operate when required, and keep records of the animals they keep, and any illness, injury, treatment or veterinary records.

In accordance with European legislation on Equine Identification and Registration, it is mandatory for equids to be identified by means of an identification document (equine passport) and a means of identification such as a transponder²⁵. Competent authorities should maintain a register of the establishments where equids are kept^{26,27}. Equids should be individually registered under the establishment they are habitually kept in²⁷. Competent authorities should regularly inspect these establishments to ensure the rules are followed and to verify the animals are kept in good conditions²⁵.

Labels, certification and platforms

In some countries, tourism operators may seek the awarding of specific labels. Such labels may be considered by tourists in order that they prioritise labelled operators. Local authorities may also communicate and advertise responsible tourism operators²⁸. Equine tourism operators and tourists should undertake close scrutiny to assess labels and certification mechanisms.

Operators may also be featured in trustworthy advertising platforms guaranteeing the welfare of animals used in tourism activities. For instance, AirBnB partnered with World Animal Protection to develop guidelines on animal welfare directed at operators and tourists using the platform²⁹. These guidelines provide for precise criteria for the use of wild and domesticated animals in tourism activities, in line with the Five Freedoms.

Stakeholder engagement

National and local authorities should ensure appropriate engagement, communication and consultation with operators engaged in equine tourism. It is important to understand the need to adapt existing regulations and provide appropriate support, as required, to ensure animal welfare standards. These measures are also important to maintain the reputation of the sector and to develop sustainable tourism.



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