



FACTSHEET: BREEDING FOR THE DONKEY SKIN TRADE

Growing demand for ejiao – a gelatin produced from donkey skins and used in traditional Chinese medicine and beauty products – is fuelling donkey slaughter across parts of Africa and Asia, causing a serious decline in donkey populations. China's own donkey population, originally used to supply the demand for donkey skin, fell dramatically from 11.1 million to 2.5 million donkeys between 1990 and 2018¹. China has now turned to the global market to source enough skins to meet demand for ejiao. This trade is threatening the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on donkeys and are left significantly worse off financially in the long-term after losing their animal²⁻⁴. Vulnerable groups are particularly affected, including women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Due to these rapidly decreasing numbers, farming systems have been set up to breed donkeys at a large scale in order to satisfy the demand for ejiao^{5,6}. In recent years, 15 provinces and 22 cities in China have announced their intention to provide subsidies to stimulate donkey breeding⁶. These donkey farming systems to produce skins are larger and more intensive than any seen before. Slaughterhouses in Kenya were also required to set up breeding programs as a condition for their licencing in 2016. Four years on, however, none of the country's four slaughterhouses have. In July 2020, Goldox Kenya Ltd reported that they have initiated a breeding program, arguing that this will address the issue of Kenya's declining donkey populations and subsequently that the Kenyan Government's ban on the trade in February 2020⁷ should be lifted.

This paper outlines Brooke's position on donkey farming and breeding for the donkey skin trade in East Africa, where slaughterhouses are proposing it as a solution to decreasing donkey numbers due to the demand for their skins. It outlines why Brooke firmly believes that the sustainable solution to tackling the effects of this trade is to ban it nationally, regionally and eventually globally.

BROOKE DOES NOT SUPPORT LARGE-SCALE BREEDING OF DONKEYS FOR THE DONKEY SKIN TRADE BECAUSE:

- Breeding to meet demand is not feasible nor economically viable.
- Positive welfare and intensive donkey breeding are incompatible.
- Live transportation and intensive donkey farms pose high disease risks.
- Ejiao is a luxury, non-evidence based product.

Breeding to meet demand is not feasible nor economically viable

It is estimated that the ejiao industry currently requires approximately 4.8 million donkey skins annually⁹. Breeding on this scale is complicated by the fact that donkeys are notoriously challenging to breed. Due to their anatomy, assisted reproduction in female donkeys is very difficult⁹⁻¹¹. Once pregnant, donkeys have a long gestation period, averaging 371 days¹²⁻¹⁴ making this a lengthy and expensive process.

The University of Reading conducted a study to analyse how quickly new donkey breeding systems that are being set up in China may be able to produce the 4.8 million skins needed annually⁹. Results show it will take at least 10 – 15 years for new farming systems to meet the demand for skins⁶.

Research has suggested that nutritional status also affects reproduction. Female donkeys that are thin or very thin may stop ovulating during parts of the year when food is less abundant^{9,15}. This observation is supported by studies in Ethiopia and Portugal showing a strong link between body condition and fertility^{9,16}. This means that breeding is even more challenging in resource-poor environments where donkeys are often less well nourished.

The money and time it would take to breed donkeys on the scale required to satisfy the demand for ejiao means that donkey farming and breeding cannot be considered an economically viable or even feasible way to meet demand for ejiao.

Positive welfare and intensive donkey breeding are incompatible

Donkeys are sentient beings whose welfare is influenced by their living and working environment, human behaviour, and the resources and services they receive. Donkeys suffer from negative physical and emotional states and benefit from and enjoy positive experiences¹⁷. As a species, donkeys have high welfare needs due to their complex nutritional requirements and the difficulties inherent in assessing their welfare and general health that result from their tendency to hide pain or other signs of distress. People interacting with these animals have a responsibility to respect these needs as outlined by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)¹⁸.

Brooke's Vision for Good Animal Welfare rests upon the Five Domains Model¹⁹ (a framework for assessing welfare, evolving from the Five Freedoms Model²⁰) which requires a set of standards to be met to satisfy an animal's needs in relation to nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioural interactions and mental state¹⁹.

In order for farms to breed and farm donkeys in a welfare friendly fashion, all of these requirements must be met. Requirements include eating a high fibre diet that involved grazing freely, little and often to achieve the minimum acceptable body condition. Further, in order to maintain a good level of health, welfare and reproductive potential, it has been recommended that each donkey needs at least 0.5 acres of grazing land²¹. A total of 301,977 donkeys, representing 15% of Kenya's donkey population were slaughtered between 2016–2018⁵. To supply another 300,000 donkeys through farming alone it would take an area half that of the Maasai Mara national game reserve (371,200 acres or almost 600 square miles in total). Stocking density, access to appropriate and regular professional health care, and ability of the handler to recognise behavioural signs of compromised welfare are crucial to ensuring positive welfare. These are just a few of the standards which must be met to ensure breeding and farming does not create negative welfare states for the animals, as well as ensuring good health and productivity.

Positive welfare in farming extends to slaughter, which must be conducted humanely and in accordance with OIE's slaughter standards¹⁸. At an absolute minimum, animals should be stunned before slaughter using a captive bolt gun which renders the animal unconscious. Analysis of export abattoirs in Kenya revealed a discrepancy of 27.7% – 100% between the number of bullets purchased for captive bolt stunning and the number of donkeys killed at those abattoirs⁵, suggesting a large number of donkeys were killed without being stunned. This defies national and international animal welfare law and standards²².

Live transportation and intensive donkey farms pose high disease risks

Large scale donkey breeding often requires live relocation and long-distance transport of donkeys which is damaging to their health and welfare. Reports of movement of donkeys for slaughter from across Africa paint a picture of overcrowded transportation over hundreds of miles, as well as exhausting distances covered on foot. This includes land border crossings which may be illegal and contravene quarantine regulations. A 2017 study conducted by Brooke revealed that significant welfare violations result from the transportation of live donkeys for trade, with self-mutilation, kick injuries and 10% of donkeys suffering bite wounds or dying in transit²³.

The conditions that donkeys are transported in are unlikely to meet minimum international recommendations outlined by the OIE in Chapters 7.2–7.4 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code¹⁸. It also poses a risk of transboundary animal diseases transmission, with OIE highlighting the donkey skin trade as a likely cause of a 2019 outbreak of Equine Influenza in West Africa which killed 62,000 animals in Niger alone²⁴.

There is also a high risk of disease at large-scale farms⁶. Intensive donkey breeding farms in China saw a significant outbreak of Strangles which spread across six farms with 13.4% of animals affected and a higher than normal mortality rate²⁵. This supports evidence from studies showing that disease outbreaks are difficult to contain and have resulted in high levels of mortality and rates of abortion on some large donkey farms^{26,27}.

Ejiao is a luxury, non-evidence based product

As an animal welfare organisation, Brooke opposes the slaughter of donkeys for the purposes of producing luxury cosmetics and traditional medicines that are not scientifically verified. Whilst increasingly popular among Chinese middle and upper classes, selling for up to £300/kg²⁸, there is no clinical evidence to support the claims that ejiao will help any health related issue.

Small-scale breeding for restocking

Breeding on a small-scale to replace stolen animals is possible while meeting good welfare standards, as stipulated by the Five Domains Model for animal welfare¹⁹. Where breeding at community level for restocking takes place, it must strictly adhere to guidance for good practice²⁹ in order to guarantee positive animal welfare.





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Brooke

2nd Floor, The Hallmark Building, 52-56 Leadenhall Street, London, EC3A 2BJ
Tel: +44 20 3012 3456 email: external.affairs@thebrooke.org

thebrooke.org  @thebrookecharity  @TheBrooke

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