

# Poor Human Practices Mutilations

## SEBWAT parameter

(Standardised Equine-Based Welfare Assessment Tool)

### Ear mutilation

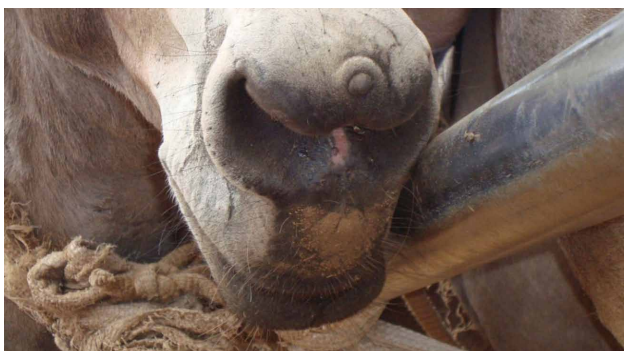
### Muzzle mutilation

### Tail mutilation

## Welfare issue

- The animal presents evidence of mutilation to the tail, ears, nostrils/lips.
- This can include cutting, slicing or piercing the ears; cutting the nostrils, lips, or piercing the septum (the cartilage dividing the two nostrils); amputation of the tail; or any combination of these.

Examples of various mutilations.



<sup>1</sup> West et al (2009)

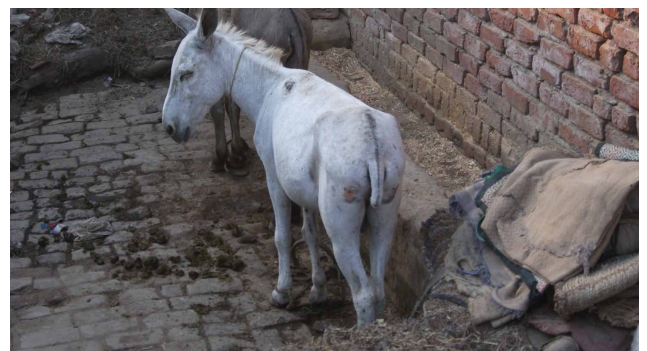
## Welfare significance

### Pain and infection risk

- Amputation or cutting of body parts will lead to pain and risk of local or systemic infection. Both the nostril and the ears in particular are sensitive structures so these procedures will be very painful.
- There is risk of tumours (neuroma) and even phantom pain in the amputated body part. Although this is not well studied in equids, phantom pain is a well-recognised side consequence of amputation in humans and so is likely to also occur in other mammals as the tissue structure is similar (REF TO BE ADDED).
- With any mutilation to the nostril area, large quantities of bacteria present in the nasal passage can lead to the wound becoming infected easily.

### Stress

- The animal is likely to become stressed by being restrained for the procedure to take place and the painful procedure itself.
- Equids have extremely good memories for events that they find frightening and/or painful, which means there can be longer-lasting psychological effects even after the wounds have healed. This is even more likely where multiple procedures are performed. For example, animals subjected to ear and/or muzzle mutilations may become head-shy after the mutilation if they have learned to associate restraint of the head with a traumatic procedure. Note: "the inability to [verbally] communicate in no way negates the possibility that an individual is experiencing pain or is in need of appropriate pain relieving treatment"<sup>1</sup>.



## Discomfort

- Equids need their tails for a variety of reasons including protection from insects and for protection against inclement weather (observe how horses turn their hindquarters towards the wind or rain during poor weather, the long hair provides warmth and guides water away from the skin).
- Equids also use their tails to indicate mood towards other horses and people e.g. an angry horse may thrash its tail, whereas a frightened donkey will clamp its tail down to its quarters. Shortening or removing the tail means that the animal will be tormented by flies and will find it difficult to signal its feelings which could lead to attacks or bullying from other horses.



Tail swishing away flies.

## Possible causation

- Cultural beliefs. There may be a mistaken belief that these procedures are beneficial to the animal and will improve health and performance. In some cultural traditions amputating a body part means that the power or energy invested in that body part is made available for the rest of the body.
- Convenience or safety. This applies predominantly to tail mutilations which may occur in some work types to minimise tangling with harnessing.
- Lack of welfare knowledge. There may be little or no understanding of the true causes of health problems and how they can be rectified.
- Lack of access to veterinary facilities and treatments. Where veterinary services are scarce, under-resourced or unaffordable, owners are more likely to use local healers or traditional remedial practices.

## Ear mutilations

- Ear mutilations are often carried out for identification reasons, as any mutilation will be permanent. In some locations, cutting the ears is traditional believed to prevent tetanus<sup>2</sup> (which is of course ineffective).

## Nose/muzzle mutilation

- If an equid is performing poorly the owner may believe that improving the animal's airflow will increase oxygen intake and so improve energy, which may be attempted by slicing the nostrils to enlarge the airway. This is a very painful procedure and will cause a great deal of bleeding and distress for the animal<sup>3</sup>.



Pierced septum/ring/rope through nose.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke (2013)

<sup>3</sup> Harris (2010)



- Increasing the size of the nostrils by slitting them in this way will not increase the volume of air the animal is able to inhale as this is determined by the animal's lung capacity rather than nostril size.
- In other instances the nostrils may be slit and the septum pierced in order to enable a rope or other material to be passed through a ring through the nose in the manner commonly used with cattle/buffalo. Equine animals are better controlled and restrained by the use of a well-fitting head-collar or bridle, which uses pressure on the outside of the nasal bone, poll and the mouth rather than on the septum. Leading them via the septum is a painful and unsafe method of restraint.

## Tail mutilation

- Historically, equine animals' tails were docked to prevent them becoming tangled in the harness, plough or reins during draught work. However, there is no evidence that docking the tail improves the safety or welfare of draught horses<sup>4</sup>.

## Means of resolution

- Although there are various reasons for mutilations, all should be challenged as ineffective and contrary to good standards of equine welfare.
- Owners should be educated that performance is improved by correct feeding, good handling, avoiding over-loading and adequate rest, not by nostril slitting and shown the scientific evidence for this.
- It should be explained that respiratory problems can be alleviated by providing clean, dust-free feed, bedding and rest areas. This is particularly important where working conditions are dusty to allow the animal a break from air-borne pathogens.
- Scientifically proven preventative measures for disease should be promoted where these exist and are available, e.g. tetanus anti-toxin.
- Non-invasive, welfare-friendly means of identification, such as hair dyes or coloured ties around the animals' necks should be promoted as an alternative to ear mutilations.
- Tying up, braiding or bandaging of the tail can be used to keep it clear of the harness rather than cutting.

Refer to the *Working Equid Veterinary Manual*, *Community Engagement work plans or strategies* and the *Handling Guidelines* before conducting an intervention.

## References

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<sup>4</sup> Cregier, S and Lefebvre et al quoted in the Canadian Veterinary Association (2013)