



The donkey skin trade in Latin America:

Challenges and
recommendations

Introduction

Donkeys are critical to the livelihood and support mechanisms of communities worldwide. For 6,000 years, they have contributed to the lives of human beings in important cultural and practical roles – from transporting Mary to Bethlehem in the Bible to carrying Alexander the Great across the desert of Gedrosia.

Donkeys are intelligent, obedient, inexpensive, and long-living creatures that adapt to diverse climatic conditions. They are often forced to bear heavy loads in times of heat and drought, more so than any other type of equine animal.

Yet, despite their significant roles in supporting communities, donkey populations are under threat from shrinking grazing areas and dangerous human practices.

The donkey skin trade is one such practice. Demand is increasing for ejiao, a gelatin produced by boiling donkey skins, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine. **The murderous trade behind this product poses a substantial risk to donkeys, despite no scientific proof of the gelatin's health efficacy.**

It is estimated that China produces 5,000 tons of ejiao each year, for which about 4 million donkey skins are needed.¹ With this high demand, China's donkey population decreased from 11 million in 1990 to 6 million in 2013.

Demand from China has driven a worldwide trade in donkey skins. The trade is illegal in some countries, where donkeys are stolen from communities and sold for slaughter. Governments and NGOs need to address this growing problem to protect donkeys and prevent people's livelihoods from being destroyed.

This report presents a current overview of the trade in ejiao in Latin America. This briefing explores the risks, consequences, cultural contexts, and frequency of this cruel practice to strengthen efforts to protect the lives of these animals.

Brooke Latin America and the Caribbean seeks to partner with concerned governments and organizations to ensure a regional ban on this trade.

How donkeys support communities

The donkey is an iconic animal in the cultural and social history of Latin America, and has been symbolic of work, strength and development for people. From attracting tourists to Burrolandia, in Otumba, Mexico,² to working in agriculture in Cochabamba, Bolivia, donkeys provide a varied and continuous service to communities across the region.

Donkeys can carry up to 50 kilos of supplies and 25 litres of water. They are used across Latin America to safely and effectively transport bulky materials such as firewood, logs, and agricultural goods. In Nicaragua, donkeys transport and load agricultural supplies; in Peru, they serve as pack animals; and in Mexico, they are widely used for tilling the land. Communities in Latin America are keenly aware of donkeys' roles in their development and food security. However, the donkey population is being decimated. The donkey skin trade is the biggest threat to its existence.

There are only 40 million donkeys worldwide. In Mexico, their population has drastically reduced from about 1.5 million in 1991 to about 300,000 recorded today.³

¹ Xinhua, 'Donkey skin sector needs tonic of supply', 16/02/2016, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-02/15/content_23485069.htm accessed 29/09/2021

² Thousands of travellers come to live with the donkeys, feed them, and be photographed with them. An annual Donkey Fair is held in Burrolandia every May 1st in honour of this animal

³ El Universal, 'Donkeyland' seeks to protect donkeys in Mexico, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/mexico-donkeyland-seeks-protect-donkeys-extinction> accessed 29/09/2021

4m
DONKEYS KILLED
a year to meet
China's demand



decrease in China's
donkey population from
1990 to 2013

3m
DONKEYS IN MEXICO
(as of 2019)



The Latin American donkey industry

The growing demand for ejiao has disrupted the Chinese industry. Shandong, the largest ejiao producer, has quadrupled the price of ejiao due to China's low donkey population. The small supply of Chinese donkeys has driven the industry into Latin America.

The donkey hide trade has recently gained popularity in Colombia, Mexico and Peru, whilst Brazil has established trade agreements with China to trade donkey skins.

Trade occurs through visiting market stalls in person or through negotiations in country, as well as online to a global market:

- **Virtual stores, such as Amazon.com, market ejiao as an alternative medicine.**
- **Alibaba, the world's largest virtual store, based in China, markets and promotes buying donkey skin.**

A risk to families and communities

Donkeys are faithful companions and friends to families. In Nicaragua, donkeys have been transporting children to school for generations.⁴ Donkeys in low and middle income countries are community ambulances, serving to transport patients to health centres. They carry agricultural tools and yields, plough the land, and transport food, water and more. Many families would not have an income without their donkey. Imagine how these families feel when they wake up and see that their donkey has been stolen to be killed. Donkey theft and killing has a detrimental emotional and economic impact on these families, leaving communities in low-income countries impoverished.⁵

"In simple terms, the livelihoods of families are at risk. Donkeys serve as income generators for the most marginalized households. These animals are used to pull carts in rural areas to busy markets or shift firewood and other goods when returning home. Donkeys are also vital to millions of people who travel long distances to secure water in arid places in Africa, Asia, and Latin America."

- Brooke USA



⁴ Front. Vet. Sci., 14 February 2020., Understanding the Attitudes of Communities to the Social, Economic, and Cultural Importance of Working Donkeys in Rural, Peri-urban, and Urban Areas of Ethiopia, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2020.00060> accessed 29/09/2021

⁵ AFP, Beyer introduces ejiao sale ban to prevent donkey slaughter, 11 September 2021 <https://augustafreepress.com/beyer-introduces-ejiao-sale-ban-to-prevent-donkey-slaughter/> accessed 29/09/2021

⁶ The Donkey Sanctuary., Under the skin., January 2017., https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/sites/uk/files/2017-11/under_the_skin_report.pdf accessed 29/09/2021

⁷ Bennett, R., Pfuderer, S., Demand for donkey hides and implications for global donkey populations, April 2019, School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading

⁸ Huachos.com., El Burro es un negocio con jugosas ganancias y muy lucrativo, 13 June 2016., <https://www.huachos.com/detalle/el-burro-es-un-negocio-con-jugosas-ganancias-y-muy-lucrativo-noticia-2864> accessed 29/09/2021

⁹ Buarque., S. B., Dialogo Chino., Brazil's Controversial Donkey Slaughter Ban., 19 June 2019., <https://dialogochino.net/en/trade-investment/28166-brazils-controversial-donkey-slaughter-ban/> accessed 29/09/2021

¹⁰ The Economist., Donkey skins are the new ivory, 30 March 2018., <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/03/30/donkey-skins-are-the-new-ivory> accessed 29/09/2021

¹¹ Reports from the Sincelejo prosecutor's office, capital of Sucre

A growing problem

According to the Donkey Sanctuary, the global skin trade reaches as high as 10 million skins per year.⁶ The donkey skin trade in Latin America is a growing problem through the legal and illegal trade.

A report on donkey hide imports to China in 2016⁷ claims that around 100,000 donkey hides were imported, mainly from Mexico and Peru (which account for more than 90% of all imports). However, donkeys are killed on a drastic scale across the Latin American continent as part of the illegal trade.

MEXICO

According to The Horse Foundation, thousands of donkeys are transported across the Mexican border to sell their meat and skin to produce ejiao. Efforts are in place to prohibit this through the Safeguard of the Export of Foods of the United States (SAFE) Act, which aims to make the slaughter of donkeys illegal on or off American soil. Currently, Brooke USA and other equine organisations are campaigning to stop retailers, such as Amazon, from marketing ejiao products.

COLOMBIA

A tenth of Colombia's donkey population was decimated between 2011 and 2016. Donkeys are reportedly transported distances of more than 1,000 km to be slaughtered.¹⁰

The sale of donkey skins in the municipality of Cesar, Colombia, has become a lucrative business. According to the Committee of Ranchers of the Ariguani Valley, donkey slaughter is on the rise, with cases of mass slaughter in Los Venados, Valledupar municipality where \$400 is paid per skin.

Between 2015 and 2016, 208 tons of donkey skin were illegally exported from Cartagena and Bonaventure to China. The slaughterhouses involved did not have the legal permits to carry out such export. The donkey skin trade has also been linked to the drug trade in Sucre. Members of the 'Los pela burros' gang, which translates into 'the donkey peelers', use donkey skins to hide and traffic drugs.¹¹

PERU

Illegal donkey skin is Peru's third highest export, after cocoa and garlic. According to the Peruvian Commission for Promotion of Export and Tourism, donkey skin exceeds the demand for artichokes, tarwi, maca, and other produce.⁸ Illegal trade in donkey skins has been found in four Peruvian districts: Sicaya, Chilca, Sapallanga, and Coto.

BRAZIL

Since 2016, a deal between Brazil and China has regulated the donkey skin trade. According to Katia Abreu, Minister of Agriculture, this export treaty generates \$3 billion annually.⁹ Brazil's most prominent donkey abattoirs in Frinordeste, Cabra Forte and Sudoeste export up to 300 tons of donkey meat per year. In North-Eastern Brazil, businesses in Bahia have exported at least 200,000 donkeys per year to China, and a recently built slaughterhouse has the capacity to kill 500 donkeys a day.



Recommendations for governments and NGOs

Brooke Latin America and the Caribbean recognizes that the challenges posed by the donkey skin trade are growing in the Latin America region. Whilst lack of water, extreme poverty, access to education, and other endemic issues are more immediate concerns in Latin America, the cruel practice of needless slaughter needs to end. Brooke would like to partner with other organizations and governments to ensure the donkey skin trade does not continue to grow.

We're looking for partners to help generate further research and evidence to support governments in developing policies to ban this trade.

We are focusing on two key challenges:

1 Data:

There are no clear, up to date statistics on donkeys in the region, making it difficult to quantify the threat. This may harm community development in the short, medium, and long term.

2 Policy:

Equines must become visible in government policies and plans that affect rural communities, as well as policies implemented by ministries across governments. From those concerned with disaster response, to environment and agriculture, all relevant ministries must include regulations and laws that protect animals and their owners. The implementation of these laws must be prioritized and funded by governments.



To tackle the growing problem of the donkey skin trade, Brooke Latin America and the Caribbean recommends that:

- Governments in the region must speak to local populations to understand the impact of this trade on rural communities. This will enable them to determine the scale of the issue.
- NGOs must create strategic alliances and partnerships to increase data and evidence in the region to support government decision making and policy.
- Governments and civil society must participate in awareness campaigns to better understand the scale of the problem and ensure informed decision making on policy and programming.
- Governments must convene working groups with experts in animal welfare and livelihoods to promote the care and protection of donkeys in exploitative industries. A local protection and security mechanism must be created so that donkeys are not stolen from families.
- Experts and NGOs must work with governments to build the capacity of local institutions, organizations, and universities on good animal welfare practices.

The donkey skin trade in Latin America is part of a global issue. Research has focused on the fundamental aspects that serve as mechanisms to dismantle any illicit activity decimating the donkey population,¹² including:

- supporting and enforcing a ban on the trade
- involving the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) in the regulation of trade agreements
- ensuring that supply chains are traceable
- involving youth leadership and young people in the movement for change

Brooke Latin America and the Caribbean will work to achieve sustainability in preserving the lives of donkeys and the livelihoods of their owners both in the region and as part of the global movement.

Contact us for further information and partnership opportunities: dstlatinamerica@thebrooke.org

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