

BROOKE CHARITY

How much is too much to bear?

International charity, Brooke says that although there may never be a global guideline for carriage weight, they are working to educate those whose livelihood depends on transporting heavy loads.

Many within the carriage driving community have been debating the issue of appropriate weights recently. Specifically, how much is too much for a horse to pull? Unfortunately, there isn't a simple answer. Factors such as the age and condition of the horse, plus the distance they are expected to travel, make it almost impossible to provide a universal guideline.

Equids have been providing draught power for thousands of years and whilst they are no longer used for working purposes in the UK, how do heavy loads affect equids currently working in less developed countries?

Ashleigh Brown, Global Animal Welfare Advisor at international equine welfare charity Brooke, says 'a strong, fit, healthy animal will be better able to cope with transporting weight than one who is injured, lame, malnourished, unfit or otherwise debilitated. Therefore, there's no appropriate 'one size fits all' guidance on load weight for our context due to the variable condition of the animals and differing abilities to comfortably cope with their workloads.'

Brooke works across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, in countries including India, Ethiopia, Nepal and Pakistan. Here, horses, donkeys and mules work long, tiring days within resource-poor communities, providing a cheap source of draught power and transport. In India, for example, equids working in brick kilns can be expected to carry up to 10 tonnes worth of weight on any given day.

Ashleigh says 'the most important aspect to consider is not the weight itself in quantitative terms, but the extent to which animals are able to cope with the load they are being asked to transport within their own working context.'

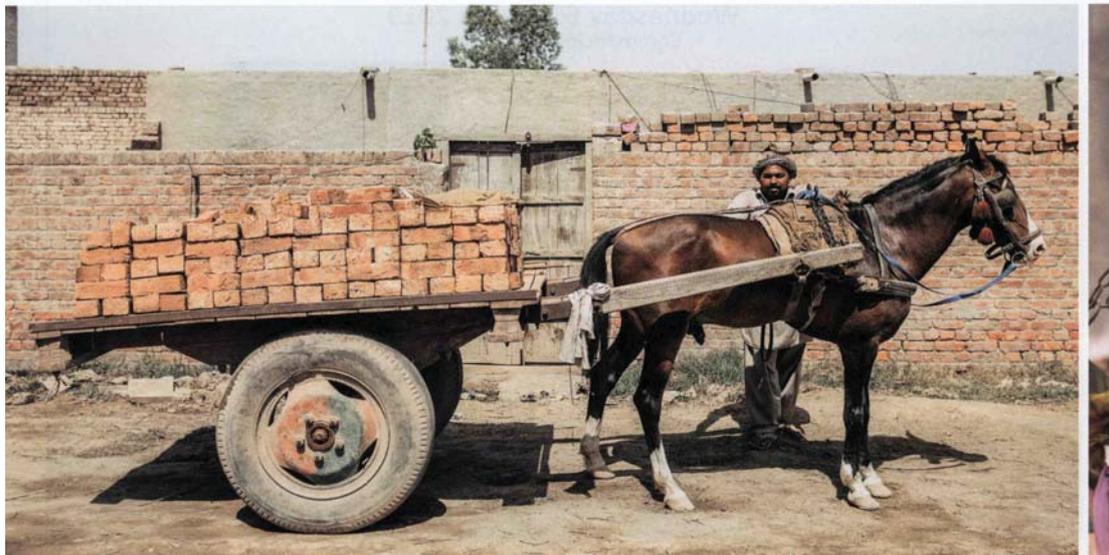
One way that Brooke is changing attitudes around what is expected of equids is through community based education programmes. Muhammad Rafiq works at the Arshad brick kiln in Lahore, Pakistan and owns a horse named Don. Don is a nine year old stallion and works with Muhammad to transport raw and cooked bricks to and from the kiln. He walks 11km each day pulling a cart loaded with 400 bricks weighing 1400kg. Since coming into

contact with Brooke, Muhammad has learnt the importance of keeping Don healthy. He says 'I want Don to be healthy so other owners can see how important good animal welfare is and if I can succeed there will definitely be a positive impact in this brick kiln.'

'I have noticed the lameness problems in the animals have gone down since Brooke's intervention. Animals were getting lame because their owners were overloading them to earn more money but I try to explain to them that this only makes their animals sick and unable to work.'

As well as acute and chronic lameness, the long-term effects of heavy loads can include skin lesions, spinal pain, and knee injuries from falling whilst transporting loads.

Of course, the welfare of animals carrying heavy loads will always be heavily influenced by the harness. A good harness will effectively transfer power from the animal to the cart, and optimise work efficiency. If the harness is not correctly configured, well-fitting and adequately maintained, this can have a negative



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impact on the animal, regardless of the weight it is transporting.

This year, Brooke and SaddleAid have teamed up to work on a new project addressing the problem of working equids being injured or impaired by their harness, including saddles, pack saddles, carts, ploughs and other equipment.

SaddleAid is a charity which designs and makes inflatable saddles to carry women living in remote areas to health centres to give birth, as well as working to improve harnesses used in developing countries.

SaddleAid's Director Peter Muckle says 'the key harnessing problems seen are poor designs made from inappropriate materials. The single

Muhammad Rafiq, pictured right has seen the benefits of following Brooke's advice and support. He now helps to promote the importance of keeping your horse fit and healthy, to fellow workers at the Arshad brick kiln in Lahore, Pakistan.

greatest need is for hitching points to be correct and understood.'

Peter continues 'one of the main problems for horses or donkeys drawing two-wheeled carts is that the shafts are not free running but firmly tied to the tugs or directly onto the saddle. The animal is pulling from the saddle and girth strap, and in the absence of breeching, often braking from the saddle as well. With loads of up to 500kg and uneven roads, the saddle digs in at both ends and the constant rubbing leads to severe wounds on the back and withers, as well as the girth.'

However, organisations such as these face challenges when it comes

to implementing sustainable change. These include a lack of tools and knowledge within communities, and indirect factors such as pressure to support livelihoods and therefore incentives to accept heavier loads or work longer hours. To find out more about Brooke's work, visit www.thebrooke.org, or to hear about the work SaddleAid is doing, visit www.saddleaid.org.

Photos: Brooke / Freya Dowson

