

## Horse and Pet Funerals

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There has yet to be a horse born that has not or will not die. This is a simple fact of life and one which has to be addressed by horse owners sooner or later. For many horse owners, the thought of their horse dying is not a palatable one. There are more issues that become relevant to this subject once it is thought about in detail. Some forethought and planning are highly recommended prior to the demise of your favourite horse.

Some issues to consider are: If the horse is sick and injured and is going to be put down, where and how does this happen? Then what is going to happen to its body? If the horse suddenly dies, what happens to its body? Just what is the connection between us and the body and the soul (if you believe they have one) of the horse? Does the death of one horse leave another horse alone and how is that horse's grieving dealt with? This sad but amazing expression of emotion does happen with horses, just as it does with other animals and birds too.

There are a lot of issues here.

Putting down, putting to sleep, humane killing or whatever it is called: it may seem macabre or bizarre subject to some but I feel it's about as natural as live and death – it happens to us all, including our pets and horses. As with anything that happens in the universe, even just the action of disposing of a horse's body after it has died, there is an effect. Every action has an effect. And it seems that even disposing of or burying a horse has attracted the attention of several 'authorities'. The Environmental Protection Agency has guidelines, the RSPCA has guidelines and state and local government bodies have guidelines all concerned with the effects and the health of the environment.

If a horse or any living creature in the wild dies, nature takes it back. There is no burial, there are no drugs; there is just a process of decay and recycling of nutrient where the animal took its last breath. Sure it's smelly and the flies have a ball and so do a myriad of other critters and bugs and bacteria that all feast on this very natural recycling process. If the animal falls in the middle of the bush all that is left is a hot spot of nutrient rich soil that over time becomes host to vegetation, which presumably will benefit some other forms of life. From whence it came. If the animal falls in a bog or waterway then that decaying body will feed or pollute, or both, the waterway and the life forms that exist within it. Usually by sheer volume, the water dilutes the decaying body down to such a minute concentration that any negative environmental effect is minimised.

That is okay in the wild. That is okay when nature is in balance and life is left to its own devices to bear, to live and to die.

In 'our' environment, due to the unnatural way humans set up and control 'life', things can be quite different than they are in the wild. If we just focus on the life of a domestic horse - or the end of a life of a domestic horse, there are several other factors that come into play. Just as in the natural environment, domestic horses reach the end of their life; some earlier than others. Sometimes we assist this process (for 'humane' reasons – to minimise suffering) and sometimes this happens naturally - the horse just dies. Rarely does a dead domestic horse just rot away in the paddock – but it does happen – usually on larger properties. I would guess that the most obvious method of 'disposal' is burial or even 'dumping' in the bush or in a gully, or a prepared open hole graveyard in the back paddock somewhere. While not a good idea and probably very illegal and

irresponsible during the summer months in much of Australia, burning is sometimes carried out as a means of disposal of a horse's body as well. Last winter, a steer that died on my property was cremated that way. It took a lot of wood, a lot of time and regular attention to the funeral pyre to finish the job satisfactorily. This method of disposal, like all the others, has an impact of some sort and magnitude on the environment.

So which is the 'better' way of 'disposing' of the body of an animal as large as a horse?

Digging a grave usually involves a backhoe or excavator. And that usually involves time, money and the burning of diesel; which in turn has an effect on the environment. The buried animal will over time break down and some parts of it may move into the water table or contaminate the soil surrounding the grave. A two metre deep and three metre long hole is required to properly bury a horse. Even the act of dragging the animal off into the bush consumes fossil fuel and the decaying body will have an effect on the surrounding environment. If the funeral pyre method is chosen there is again the use of fuel to build the fire and the 'pollution' created because of the fire. Every action has a reaction.

Of particular concern a friend who raised this matter was the use of Pentobarbitone (also known as Green Dream), an anaesthetic used in large doses (up to 150ml for a horse) to sedate and shut down the life in the animal. Using this lethal drug may seem like a humane way of killing a horse as opposed to shooting it but a well placed bullet can be a quick way of putting an animal out of its misery or distress - it's just a lot more dramatic. The very sight of and use of a gun evokes much more emotion than the relatively gentle way a needle is given and the animal lies down, goes to sleep and then dies. Either way, lethal injection or a correctly placed bullet, the animal apparently does not know any difference.

Pentobarbitone has a long toxic life. An animal injected with this drug will retain it in its cells or residue for many years and anything eating or consuming those cells will ultimately be affected by its lethal properties. Pentobarbitone is not a nice thing to be putting out into the environment. One vet I spoke with reassured me that the quantities used to put an animal down are small considered with the scale of the environment. So little it doesn't matter. Despite his reassurances, I thought that given the situation where hundreds or thousands of unwanted dogs and cats and other pets are put down each year and disposed of in landfills near heavily populated areas, are we not creating another toxic problem for generations in the future? But Pentobarbitone's use is seen by many as 'humane'. One way around this conundrum is perhaps to cremate the said euthanased horse - but as previously discussed, even that has an adverse affect on the environment. And the local pet crematorium cannot handle horse sized animals anyway. Can't win really.

Anecdotally, some animal shelters, pounds and some veterinary practices that are faced with the grim task of putting unwanted or suffering animals down have had body disposal issues to contend with. I have heard of animal bodies being dumped in landfills and down disused mine shafts. Even the pet crematorium industry has a history of unscrupulous operators just dumping bodies of pets in the bush. If these things do occur, they must be exposed and stopped. Responsible disposal of animals' bodies is carried out according to regulations in the vast majority of situations though.

To some people a horse is 'just an animal'. It is an eater of grass that has a 'value' of some sort and that value can be converted into cash, into meat or into

fertilizer and other products. In these situations the owners of these animals place a different value on the said animal than some of us might. If a horse is no longer useful or is old and decrepit, the human will often use another means of disposal. There are knackeries around the countryside that will pick up or take these horses and 'process' them into products that can be useful to society. Carnivore pets – dogs and cats – need to eat meat to be healthy; blood and bone fertilizer is used by savvy gardeners to grow healthy gardens and all sorts of brushes are made of animal hair, manes and tails. Is this 'use' of an animal unethical? Does it make a difference if the leather we use is from cow, pig, sheep or horse? Our Akubras are made from bunny fur and our lasagne dinners are made from tomatoes fertilized with blood and bone and, mince meat from old dairy cows. Humans using the bodies of animals so that we may live has been going on since we first became hungry and cold – a very long time indeed.

I guess by being aware of the implications of the various methods of disposing of a horse's body we can decide which is the better of the available options for us, for the horse and for the environment. A small amount of thought and planning and emotional preparation before the event will make the process more bearable for some of us too. If you, like I, believe in horses having souls (and all living things having souls for that matter) then a part of that belief may include the body of the living thing just being a vessel from which the soul separates at or near the point of death (maybe this 'is' death). In other words, after life, the soul departs for other pastures in the universe and the body just becomes nutrient for nature to continue on its fantastic and mysterious way.

Food for thought.