

DONKEY HOOVES -- A Hoof Trimmer's Perspective

© Glenn Wilson May 2010

"The best way to forget all your troubles is to wear tight shoes".

The donkey and horse version of the above is, "If my feet hurt then I feel like crap". The reality is that too many donkeys and horses suffer bad hooves - and they needn't - so their behaviour is affected. It is our absolute duty, as the owners and carers of these animals, to ensure that their hooves are in the best condition possible.

The internet does have its usefulness. In the case that prompted this article, a donkey owner found me on the internet, rang me to discuss her donkey's hooves, emailed me some very clear pictures of said hooves and donkey so I could see what she was describing, and later I Googled "donkey hoof pathologies" and a whole lot of other articles on Donkey hooves. Prior to this episode with Lily (the donkey), my knowledge of and experience with donkeys and their hooves was fairly slim. The flip side then is that there is really no excuse for donkey owner, veterinarian, or hoof trimmer/farrier to be ignorant re their hooves. All the information is there and it's free. All we gotta do is look!

Hooves are generally a reflection of their environment. A hard, tough environment will usually produce hard, tough hooves. A soft, rich grass, moist environment is usually a disaster for hooves. Many animals' hooves are a result of evolution and adaptation to the 'wild' environment in which they have lived and evolved. In the donkeys' case, those who live in harsh, rocky, mountainous terrain seem to have the 'ideal' super tough hooves. Many domestic donkeys who live in the 'spare block' or in the back yard, or by themselves often have less than adequate hooves for optimum health and comfort. This is not the end of the world though; it's a pretty easy situation to remedy and can be as simple as having regular hoof care applied, getting donkey company for a solo animal, putting gravel down around the water trough and on the areas where donkey moves most or even sacrificing the convenience of having donkey living in the back yard and agisting him/her with other donkeys in the rocky paddock nearby.

This last option is usually the sticky one for donkey and horse owners alike. They fear they will 'lose control' of their pet, or it's not convenient (for the person) so it is generally not considered an option. But it does work and can be a win-win situation for animal and human alike. The prerequisite is simply building a great relationship with your donkey or horse first. They are both 'herd' animals and for their mental and physical wellbeing, should have the company of their own type with which to communicate, socialise, play with, learn from and even squabble with. To achieve this donkey heaven it requires us, as owners, to step outside our comfort zones and put the donkey first - really first.

Donkeymanship. Not a pretty word really but one we should all get familiar with. Having a well handled and cooperative animal makes life easier for all concerned. From a hoof trimmers point of view, we like to get our job over and done with quietly, quickly and accurately. It's easier on us and the animal. We are not paid to train the animal, nor should we have to, unless we are paid to. A better option is for the owner to build cooperation and understanding with the donkey, using sound 'donkeymanship principals, from the first day it arrives in the paddock (born** or delivered). That way you have an animal that is easier for you to manage and the trimmer has an animal that very



quickly understands that giving its hoof and standing quietly while it is assessed and trimmed makes for a better experience. It's a much nicer outcome. A goal could be (and I use this with the horses in the 'home paddock') is for the trimming to take place with the lead rope on the ground, in the paddock, surrounded by the rest of the herd. That's cooperation and understanding and it's fairly easy to achieve.

Lily's hoof problems. Having a sound knowledge of the hoof, its function and most of the problems and solutions hooves are associated with, makes it much easier for donkey owners to deal with vets, trimmers and farriers. Having knowledge is empowering. It's also a way of ensuring that you are getting value for money when a practitioner does come to your place to see your animal.

In Lily's case, her owner called a vet to diagnose Lily's problem which manifested in front hoof lameness, persistent coronary abscessing from the lateral quarters in both hooves and a strong tendency for Lily to 'toe walk'. The vet could see nothing really wrong with her hooves and prescribed some antibiotics for the abscessing.

Lily's owner administered the antibiotics and thankfully kept looking for an answer to her hoof problems and subsequently contacted me. What I found (and it was not difficult to spot either) was a sheared lateral heel in one hoof (above which I found some deep tissue infection and fungal attack) and a similar, but deeper, hole in the seat of corn area in the other hoof.



No wonder this poor baby didn't want to walk on her heels! I dug gravel, wheat grain size and larger, out of cavities nearly three centimetres deep into Lily's hooves. This was mixed with dirt, fungus and black goo. Imagine something like that between your toes or eating into your heels! The cavities were cleaned, flushed and packed, and now we wait. We wait and see what nature will do and observe and re treat the cavities dependant on the healing process.

Lily's nutritional and mineral requirements are also being re-assessed. Treating the hooves in isolation is wasting time and money. Treating the hooves as an integral part of a living creature requires us to look wholistically at the many co-joined factors that make up Lily. Her age, her living arrangements, the season, the health of the soil in which her pasture grows, what pasture is growing in her paddock, what feed is brought in, donkey company, how much she moves, when she is supplementarily fed, what her teeth are like, what her water supply is, the amount of stress in her life, her natural demeanour, mineral deficiencies and supplements, the relationship she has with humans, and so on. There is more, much more, to a happy, content and healthy donkey than meets

the eye. Covering all these, and more, bases does work though. It usually means less health problems for the animal, less requirement for expensive vet visits, a longer, happier life and smiles all round.

Very few veterinarians know what a healthy equid hoof looks like. And by the same token many do not know what an unhealthy hoof looks like especially if the pathology is subtle, one they haven't seen before or simply one that may be an 'out of shape hoof'. The same can probably be said for a great number of donkey and horse owners as well.

General Hoof Care. Hooves of equids grow all the time. The growth rate is variable and has to be considered along with the wear rate of the hoof. More often than not domestic horses and donkeys (maybe to a lesser degree for the latter) grow more hoof than wears, due mainly to fences. Fences usually mean less movement and less movement means less wear. Less wear means overgrown hooves and overgrown hooves need constant management for the well being of the animal concerned. Pathologies commonly found in domestic donkey and horse hooves are uncommon in wild donkeys and horses.

We humans have inadvertently created a situation that causes our animals to suffer, unless we become proactive and manage the situation, or change the situation to better suit the animals' naturally evolved requirements.

Regular and appropriate hoof care is a non negotiable basic requirement. Whether you learn to do it yourself or have a qualified or experienced hoof trimmer or farrier do it for you; it has to be done. Long, chipped, split or cracked hooves are simply painful for the animal. Disease and fungal infections only add to the suffering. Another reason why neglected hooves are so common is that our donkeys and horses suffer in silence. If they screamed in pain perhaps we would take more notice. It is our duty to prevent suffering in the animals in our care.

If the above resonates with you (or if you feel uncomfortable and a little guilty reading this), let's get on with the solution. Firstly the internet. Learn about hooves, and if you know about hooves, learn some more about hooves. Contact trimmers who are knowledgeable or who are keen to learn about donkey hooves. Get your farrier or trimmer onto the websites you get your information from. Discuss the information with them and if they are not interested, let them go. Organise a hoof clinic. There are many well qualified hoof care practitioners around the country who conduct hoof care clinics.*** See resources section at the end of this article. Then ensure you are able to factor into having regular and appropriate hoof care applied the donkey or donkeys (more preferable) in your care.

A happy, sound donkey can mean a happy donkey owner and that can also mean a happy donkey owner's spouse or family. That's worth doing.

****Foal Imprinting:** This technique of desensitising a new born foal, if done correctly, achieves several things. The foal accepts humans as a normal part of their life from the start, it is comfortable being touched all over, it is comfortable having its hooves and legs handled, it is easier to teach to lead and move around in halter and it is easier to introduce to harness and saddle if that's what your plans are. Foal Imprinting is not an excuse for a disrespectful animal. Discipline is also achieved using this method, but with respect, not fear based, teaching.

***Resources:

Hoof Clinic providers: This is just a starting point. I'm sure there are others.....

- Glenn Wilson - Hooves Naturally. www.waterfallcreek.com.au/horses Ph 02 6071 0210 VIC & Sthn NSW
- Carola Adolf www.equinebarehoofcare.org Melbourne East and Mornington Peninsula
- Julie Leitl www.ausequinearts.com Melbourne NE & Yarra Ranges
- Peter Laidley www.hoofworksaustralia.com SE QLD
- Jeremy Ford www.wildabouthooves.com.au TAS
- Andrew Bowe - The Barefoot Blacksmith www.barehoofcare.com Melbourne Nth and Alexandra/Yarck

Other useful websites:

- www.australianhooftrimmers.com
- www.aebm.org.au
- www.hoofrehab.com
- www.equethy.com.au
- www.safergrass.org

Books, Websites and articles: Have a look at (Google) Pete Ramey, Jamie Jackson, or just Google 'donkey hooves' or 'donkey hoof pathologies'. There really is a ton of information out there.

Author's Bio: Glenn Wilson writes to support his passion for horses 😊

After ignoring horses for many decades Glenn was amazed at what he had missed out on all these years. So diving in, boots and all he did some serious catch up and now has a large paddock with an odd collection of riding, driving, retirees and young horses. He is a qualified barehoof trimmer, student horseperson and loves a ride in the high country. His horses are ridden and driven barehoof and bitless. And he is keen to learn more about donkeys. See www.waterfallcreek.com.au