

UP-led community project puts the welfare of donkeys and people in the driving seat

Posted on February 22, 2022



A unique community engagement project led by the University of Pretoria (UP) is focusing its efforts on holistically improving the welfare of donkeys and the well-being of people in rural communities.

The Bahananwa Community Welfare and Livelihood Support project is providing immediate relief and support for donkeys in 10 villages in the Blouberg Municipality in Limpopo.

The project was started in July last year and is being led by Dr Quixi Sonntag, Community Engagement Coordinator in the Faculty of Veterinary Science at UP, in partnership with Dr Isabel Meyer of animal welfare NGO One Revolution and Professor Leanne Scott of the Department of Statistical Sciences at the University of Cape Town.

“Donkeys are a neglected species, both in the sense that they are often undervalued – while in fact, they contribute significantly to people’s well-being – and in the sense that the Veterinary Science curriculum does not include donkeys as a separate study area,” Dr Sonntag says.

The long-term aim of the Bahananwa project, which received financial support from the Donkey Sanctuary in the UK, is to establish mechanisms of support to ensure sustained benefit for the community and its animals. About one-third of South Africans live in rural communities, and many do not have easy access to veterinary services.



This project has enabled Dr Sonntag and her team to study the dynamics of a rural community and its interactions with its animals, in particular donkeys.

“Donkeys are extensively used by the communities in Blouberg for ploughing fields and to transport water, wood, building materials and people,” she says. “Not only are the donkeys beneficial for personal use by their owners, but they are also a source of income as they are rented out to other members of the community who do not own donkeys.”

Through a participatory approach, the UP-led team is engaging with local community members to learn more about how the animals are cared for, and how their health and welfare can be enhanced.

Part of the project involved forming a community group, called the Bahananwa Donkey Friends, to administer a survey in the 10 villages they represent. The results of the survey identified several important issues that could be addressed to ensure that the donkeys are well cared for. They include healthier nutrition to improve the physical condition of the animals, well-fitted harnesses to reduce skin lesions, knowledge of the correct use of medication, and better cart designs to make the carriers more efficient and safer.

During the survey, the team noted that the interviews and assessments conducted by the Donkey Friends group resulted in increased awareness of and interest in animal welfare among members of the communities.

While some community members recognise the value of donkeys and have expressed pride in having healthy animals, for others, donkeys are at the bottom of the hierarchy, with cattle above them and people at the top. By increasing awareness of the worth of donkeys through participatory community meetings and networking among communities, the image of these animals may improve and their hard work better appreciated. With improved harnesses, nutrition and husbandry practices, donkeys will be able to do more work more efficiently.

Donkey-driven transport is often perceived to be a sign of poverty, and lack of technology and advancement. But Dr Sonntag and her team would like to encourage a shift in perception towards acknowledging the important role that donkeys have to play in parts of South Africa.

“We hope to expand the project to facilitate the training of remunerated local animal welfare workers who can liaise with local veterinarians to improve access to veterinary services in the area,” she says. “In the long term, we envision a satellite practical-training facility for Veterinary Science students. It is essential that our project leads to a sustainable programme that will benefit the local community and its animals for a long time.”

The team also recognises that for any meaningful change to happen, all types of animals that are prevalent in the communities they are working with will need to be considered. This includes cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens and dogs. The researchers are also keenly aware of the interdependency among humans, animals and the environment – when there is a drought, for instance, all three are affected. This recognition aligns with the One Health school of thought, a collaborative, transdisciplinary approach that aims to achieve optimal health outcomes by recognising that the health of people, animals and our shared environment are closely connected.

“We hope that the envisaged student training facility will eventually become an integrated One Health facility, where multiple faculties can engage collaboratively with the community.”

Through this project, contact between the community and the local compulsory community service (CCS) veterinarians in the nearest town was established in order to improve access to veterinary services. “We hope that our model will be applicable to other CCS clinics in the country to encourage national application,” Dr Sonntag says. The experience gained through this project could inform curriculum development at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, she adds.

“This project is gratifying because it combines my professional interests in animal welfare, community engagement and teaching and learning, with the opportunity to make a difference in a community that has personal meaning for me,” Dr Sonntag says. “This is the community where my grandfather worked as a missionary in the 1890s. The Bahananwa people have been exceptionally welcoming to our team and it is a privilege to be working with them towards a common goal.”

Published by Siphon Mphurpi