

Belief in animals' capacity for emotion linked to better health and welfare

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Working equids whose owners believe in their capacity to feel emotion have significantly better health and welfare outcomes than those whose owners do not, according to new research by the University of Portsmouth and international animal welfare charity, The Donkey Sanctuary.

The study is the first to show a link between the [welfare](#) of working equids—including donkeys, horses, and mules—and the attitudes and beliefs of their [owners](#), in different countries and contexts around the world.

Researchers visited equid-owning communities in Egypt, Mexico, Pakistan, Senegal, Spain and Portugal, where they carried out welfare assessments. This included a questionnaire for owners about their beliefs, values and attitudes toward their animals; and a detailed assessment of the equids' welfare.

The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, found animals whose owners believed they felt emotions or who had an emotional bond with them, were in significantly better health and had higher body condition scores than those whose owners did not, or who focused on how profitable or useful they were.

Similarly, animals whose owners believed they could feel pain were much less likely to be lame. These relationships were evident across multiple countries, with varying economic incomes.

Lead author, Dr. Emily Haddy, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Portsmouth's Centre for Comparative and Evolutionary Psychology, said, "We know people's feelings toward their animals can impact their welfare, but we wanted to know if this differs across cultures. Our research involved equid-owning communities in six countries, whose animals worked in a diverse range of contexts including

agriculture, tourism and construction.

"This is the first study to link owner attitudes to the welfare of their working equids across multiple countries and contexts. Our findings highlight the importance of the relationship between owners and their animals, and its significant impact on animal health and welfare."

Co-author and Executive Director of Equine Operations at The Donkey Sanctuary, Dr. Faith Burden, said, "We have long understood that donkeys and mules are sensitive and sentient beings, who fare best when they are treated as individuals and with the kindness and respect they deserve. This study provides further peer-reviewed, scientific evidence to support our work across the world.

"What's really exciting is these findings could inform and increase the efficacy of future welfare initiatives. For example, promoting emotional connection and awareness of animal sentience among owners of working equids could potentially influence attitudes and lead to improvements in the welfare of working equids around the world."

Co-author, Dr. Leanne Proops, Associate Professor in Animal Behavior at the University of Portsmouth's Department of Psychology, added: "This is a fascinating study that highlights the link between attitudes to animal sentience and welfare. However, it's important to avoid assumptions about the owners of animals who had poorer health and welfare indicators.

"It's possible these owners simply don't have the resources to look after their animals as well, and because they don't like to think of them suffering, they adjust their beliefs to think that their animals don't feel pain. This is a well-documented psychological technique that people use to minimize psychological distress when their behavior and beliefs don't align.

"This is a very important study that paves the way for further research to establish causality, and a greater understanding of compassion and animal welfare."

More information: Emily Haddy et al, Belief in Animal Sentience and Affective Owner Attitudes are linked to Positive Working Equid Welfare across Six Countries, *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10888705.2023.2228029](https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2023.2228029)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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