

A rescue by any means



THE SONG WRITTEN by Chris Blignaut says:

*O, die donkie is 'n wonderlike ding,
ja-nee die donkie is 'n wonderlike ding
hy rol in die sand en hy vreet 'n koerant,
o, die donkie is 'n wonderlike ding.*

Yes, donkeys are truly wonderful animals! Those of us who do not rely on donkeys as draft or pack animals probably rank donkeys as one of the most endearing domesticated animals. Donkeys who are draft or pack animals sadly do not have wonderful lives. They are “wonderful things” living largely dreadful lives.

The donkey is an equine domesticated in Africa some 5000–7000 years ago. It has been used mainly as a working animal since that time. Research suggests there are more than 40 million donkeys in the world, mostly in underdeveloped countries, where they are used principally as draught or pack animals.



The Horror of the Hide Trade

What is not so commonly known, donkeys are slaughtered for their skins. The collagen from their skin produces what is known as ejiao, (*pronounced uh-jee-ow*), which is used in food, drink or beauty products and considered a traditional Chinese medicine.

A 2016 study conducted by **The University of Reading** calculated that the ejiao industry required between 2.3 and 4.8 million donkey skins to keep up with demand. A follow-up study in 2023 found that the ejiao industry

now requires a minimum of 5.9 million donkey skins to keep up with the latest demand.

China's domestic donkey population has collapsed. Because of this, the ejiao industry has shifted to a global trade network to source its donkey skin to continue meeting demand. The trade in donkey skins is illegal in some countries and legal in others. Where the trade operates legally, its size and complexity mean it is almost entirely unregulated, with no means of monitoring donkeys' welfare or tracking the source of individual skins. Where the slaughter of donkeys and the export of their skins is illegal, donkeys are stolen and traded indiscriminately in defiance of national and local laws. We also have evidence of links to organised criminal activity.

Legal or not, the trade in donkey hides brings cruelty and suffering to donkeys wherever it operates. From source to slaughter, the donkeys who get caught up in this trade suffer at every stage. The slaughter methods are often unregulated, inhumane and unsanitary, and large numbers of donkeys die on their way to slaughterhouses.



The transportation of untreated skins and improper disposal of donkey carcasses risks triggering the spread of infectious diseases and is damaging local ecosystems. There is **evidence that criminals exploit the skin trade** and are smuggling and selling illegal products alongside donkey skins.

Donkeys Enter My Life

My awareness of the donkey hide trade into China is the reason I have the pleasure of the company of donkeys in my sanctuary. In this piece I will allow you to draw the conclusion that some people are just wired differently. Rescuers will understand and those who don't are allowed to laugh at those of us who do everything we do to avoid animal cruelty and suffering one animal at a time.

One problem (and there are many) with being an "unrehabilitateable rescuer" is I have an acute awareness of anything that impacts on an animal's life. On my way from my Free State home to KwaZulu-Natal I made my obligatory stop at the cherry farm for a cherry ice cream. At the cashier I noticed a pile of a local newsletter. I left clutching the local news with my cup of cherry heaven.

A piece of paper informed me that the municipal pound in Ladybrand was to hold a sale the very next week. Apart from actually wishing I could buy all the animals at the pound; my attention was focussed on the donkeys listed as for sale. If you know where Ladybrand is

located vis-à-vis the Maseru gate entrance into Lesotho and how the Chinese population in the neighbouring country has expanded, you will understand my anxiety.

During my visit in KZN I did my homework on the location of the Ladybrand municipal pound for a planned in-person recce when passing on the way home. As Murphy would have it, I left KZN late and as I neared Ladybrand the sun was just dipping behind the horizon. Ahead lay another 156 kilometres of which 75 kilometres were dirt road. I deliberated for many kilometres with the dark edging ever closer, should I stop or should I pass and not delay my travel into the night? At the instant I spotted the turnoff to the pound I made the decision to stop and at the least visit my first municipal pound.

I saw the group of donkeys as my headlights turned in the gate. There was even a baby! That sealed it. I entered the premises through the open gate and parked to walk closer to the donkey enclosure. I had created my own dilemma. Now I had confirmed the donkeys' existence in the pound, how was I going to do anything about my desire to save them from becoming an input into the ejiao industry or a draft animal in a poor neighbouring country?

Out of the dim last light of day came a vehicle with a man and his son from Bloemfontein, clearly regular pound auction attendees, sent by the donkeys gods. We exchanged business cards with the promise of a call in the morning. The thought of the road ahead in the dark was bad enough, but returning 36 hours later for the sale was a non-starter.

Enter the donkey god. A day later I received a call that I was the owner of all the donkeys at a cost of R500 per head. I am sure I paid a healthy premium to the bidder but I had saved the donkeys and could avoid the trip back to Ladybrand with him offering to transport them together with his purchases to Bloemfontein.

Two days later after giving my morning's lectures at the university, with a polite lady's voice instructing me from my mobile telephone when and where to turn left and right, I set out to collect my donkeys. My next piece of equipment has got to be a GoPro with an attachment for my head so I can record events such as loading five donkeys into a VW transporter bus. In those moments of madness there is no time nor free hands to video proceedings.

How does a vehicle survive transporting five frightened large animals? The answer is a good brand of pressure washer and a blind eye to the actual recklessness of the entire exercise. The donkeys were not to ever pull a cart nor become ejiao and if that meant a bit of irrationality then so be it.

Home at the Sanctuary

Perhaps the donkeys have heard the lines of the song about them, perhaps they could read my mind about the reasons for sparing them a life of hardship, perhaps they just wanted to thank me for picking up the paper while buying an ice cream; they soon found their voices and the neighbourhood resounded with donkey greetings. The sanctuary had become home to five new arrivals – Ernie, Gus, Momma, Poppet and Milly as they were to be named.

Of the many things being involved in rescue has taught me, donkeys have a sense of humour, are super-intelligent and bond with each other and pine for one another. How sad their lives must be wherever they are alone, tied up when not forced to pull a heavy cart. Not even to mention the suffering brought on by the cruel Chinese medicine trade. ★

FURTHER INFORMATION

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