Pack mule welfare on expedition

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Introduction

The welfare of pack mules and muleteers has, until recently, been largely ignored by the Mountain Tourism and Expedition industries. Recent research work has, however, allowed those involved in the industry to recognise their responsibilities to the mules and muleteers working on their trips (Cousquer and Allison, 2012; Cousquer, 2015; Schmidt 2015). This poster provides an overview of the background history to this problem, the key concerns and the actions that you can take, in your capacity as an individual, an organisation, an expedition or as a travel company to really make a difference!

Ensure the team, travel agency or tour operator you travel with has a comprehensive mule welfare policy in place and a professional well-trained team of mules and muleteers.

Common Problems

- Bitting Injuries, Abusive Relations, Tethering Injuries, Overloading, Saddle Sores, Malnutrition and Weight Loss

A failure to understand good muleteering practice means that many pack mules are worked in traditional bits, where head collars and mules are subjected to chronic pain and discomfort and allows people with little respect for, or understanding of, their animals to work them effectively. This represents a betrayal of the animal and has no place in the modern world where we seek to promote trust and understanding as the basis for good relations in tourism. These bits also make eating and drinking very difficult if not impossible, thereby contributing to dental problems, malnutrition and weight loss.

Amongst the problems that the industry is most obviously responsible for is overloading. This causes untold problems as mules are burdened with more weight than they can carry and, in doing so, meet some of their essential behavioural and nutritional needs. The traditional bit, however, is designed to cause pain and discomfort and allows people with little respect for, or understanding of, their animals to work them effectively. This represents a betrayal of the animal and has no place in the modern world where we seek to promote trust and understanding as the basis for good relations in tourism. These bits also make eating and drinking very difficult if not impossible, thereby contributing to dental problems, malnutrition and weight loss.

Amongst the problems that the industry is most obviously responsible for is overloading. This causes untold problems as mules suffer chronic damage to their joints and tendons. It can also lead to mules falling and suffering fractures. Riding a loaded mule shows little respect for the mule’s welfare and is storing up problems (including dehydration, fatigue, exhaustion and injury) for later. And yet, with few exceptions, most trekking companies do not have a clear policy to ensure mules are not overloaded and that owners do not ride.

Other common welfare abuses that are currently the norm in the industry include:

- Failure to inspect mules and ensure they are fit to work.
- Failure to check equipment is in good condition and fit for purpose.
- Failure to water mules at the start of the day leading to dehydration.
- Failure to provide a balanced healthy diet leading to weight loss and saddle sores.
- Tethering mules with thin nylon ropes that cause rope burns.
- Failure to repair and maintain equipment leading to injury.
- Failure to provide good foot care that respects the natural function of the hoof.
- Failure to provide health care in the event of injury or accident.

References

