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*Discussing Equine Ethics: Taking Stock from Theory and Practice*

## **Ethical Reflections on the Dignity and Welfare of Horses and other Equids**

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### **1. Introduction:**

Equine professionals of the *Swiss Horse Industry Council and Observatory* dedicated the past decade to a thorough study of contemporary ethical challenges and questions arising within equestrian practices and within the equine world more generally. The report “Ethical reflections on the dignity and welfare of horses and other equids” (Poncet, et al., 2022) is being released in 2022 as a result of this in-depth investigation. In this presentation, Dr med vet Stéphane Montavon (in the name of COFICHEV) will present the report and the different factors that contributed to its final formulation. The contemporary contexts and motives pressing the urgency of publishing such a report will be discussed as well as the challenges met within the reflection process. Alongside key general results, input on particular questions will be presented. The presentation will also suggest

a preview of the ethical challenges to be foreseen within equine cultures in the near future.

## **2. A Paradygm Shift:**

The horse, once a livestock animal and a symbol of masculinity – serving as a social and economic engine reserved for agricultural work, transport, and the military – has now conquered the urban and female domains. Horses have become faithful companions for leisure and sport, and even for conversation. Sometimes, people even attribute feelings to horses. For a long time, however, the main actors in the horse industry focused on the market and on growth, without considering welfare to be a sustainability factor in its own right. This view strongly marginalised the interests of the animal.

Society's demands are increasing and are manifest in publications that call into question many practices involving horses – threatening the industry's social licence to operate (SLO). Public outcries and controversies primarily target the suffering that horses experience through their exploitation, as well as industry-related environmental damage. An initial analysis reveals that people approach the issue from two different angles. The most popular angle, the ethic of responsibility, aims to protect animals and tolerates their utilisation by humans in exchange for the care and subsistence we provide for them. This pragmatic and reasoned line of thought accepts, under certain conditions, the asymmetry of the relationship between humans and equids; it stems from the irreversible

status of the domestic animal. By weighing in the interests of both parties (equids and people) with a just balance, it is possible to examine, from a moral point of view, how to minimise the intensity of a strain and justify it. On the other end of the scale, the angle of conviction ethics forms an opposite approach, rejecting the concept of any gap between humans and animals. As such, abolitionists and anti-speciesists radically advocate for the abolition of all forms of use of living beings, but, rooted in idealism, have little or no concern for the consequences of such a systematic position.

The COFICHEV supports the principle of personal responsibility towards the horse. From an ethical point of view, it defends the possibility of employing equids, provided that certain imperatives are respected. Only overriding interests can justify the strains. In addition, the day-to-day conditions of management (keeping), work, and transport, as well as end-of-life decisions, must respect essential welfare standards based on scientific studies.

### **3. Definitions:**

The AniWA (Animal Welfare Act) characterises good **welfare** as a state in which the animal does not experience negative sensations or sustained dissatisfaction of its natural needs. More specifically, the conditions under which animals are kept and fed should not disturb their bodily functions and behaviour. Nor should those conditions excessively push the animals' biological capacity to adapt. Thus, within the limits of that capacity, equids

should remain able to behave in accordance with their species. They should be clinically healthy and free of pain, suffering, harm, and anxiety.

Today, (domestic) animal welfare specialists have developed a viewpoint that takes into account several parameters: positive emotions, good physical and mental health, appropriate function, and species-appropriate habitus. Currently, the best-known approach is that of the **Five Freedoms, considered independent and indispensable**:

1. Animals must have access to water and food in quantities appropriate to their species,
2. Their management conditions must not cause them any psychological suffering (fear, distress, etc.),
3. They must have a certain degree of physical comfort,
4. They must not be subjected to any ill-treatment that could cause pain or injury, and they must receive treatment in the event of illness,
5. They must be able to live in an environment appropriate to their species.

These parameters reflect an ideal and theoretical state characterised by the absence of negative signs. However, the essential conditions for welfare and for the sustainability of anticipated progress are lacking in order to specify whether welfare is minimally acceptable, good, or excellent in concrete situations. To this aim, numerous studies are currently underway to find reliable indicators based on the animal and on the environment. Such indicators can help assess and improve welfare.

The AWIN (*Animal Welfare Indicators*) protocols for horses and for donkeys meet these objectives. In practice, they are widely used.

According to the AniWA, **dignity is each animal's inherent worth** that humans must uphold in their relationships with that animal. This means that we must respect each animal for himself or herself (including individual particularities, behaviours, and preferences). We must therefore take that unique worth into account and hold each animal in high moral regard, independent of our own impressions, opinions, and experiences. As such, animals' inherent worth should not be tied to their instrumental usefulness, nor to their sentimental, heritage, or market value.

**Strain is a** physical or psychological action by a human being to impose a benefit. In extreme cases, the term also includes any violence applied to animals to force them to do something against their will or to prevent them from doing what they want. The definition also covers the negative consequences of such actions. Strain always affects dignity. Dignity is only comprised, however, if overriding interests cannot justify it. This is the case, for example, when animals are subjected to pain, suffering, or harm, or exposed to anxiety or humiliation, or undergo interventions that profoundly alter their appearance or abilities, or are excessively objectified as instruments, also known as instrumentalization (Art. 3 AniWA).

The AniWA (art. 4) prohibits the unjustified<sup>1</sup> and unnecessary imposition of strains on animals (injury, pain, stress, restriction of freedom, violation

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added

of dignity, overwork, etc.). Implicit in this standard is the need to weigh the different interests of the parties involved (humans, animals, and the environment) to determine whether the strain is justified. If its impact on the horse outweighs the interests of the other parties, the strain in question is abusive and amounts to a contempt of dignity.

The concepts of **pain**, **suffering**, and **harm** are not easy to distinguish, but understanding them helps to clarify any impairments to welfare. **Pain** is characterised by an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with real or suspected tissue damage (lameness, colic). It is noted that donkeys do not show pain as blatantly as horses do; they remain more stoic. Animals experience suffering as negative emotions that affect their quality of life and impair their welfare. **Suffering** is expressed through abnormal behaviour and body language (facial expressions, ear position, postures, etc.). **Harm** is manifested by loss of functionality or behavioural disorders, such as limited responsiveness to stimuli. It appears when animals are pushed to extreme levels of adaptation.

**Anxiety** is also part of the negative emotions group. Whether sporadic or long-lasting, anxiety is characterised by a state of alertness, a disorganisation of self-control, and a decrease in the ability to adapt to variations in the environment. It constitutes a strain that provokes stress and suffering. It occurs under certain threatening conditions that are particularly anxiety-provoking and stressful, such as transportation in a vehicle, road traffic, participation in a sporting event, or farrier and veterinary care. Anxiety can manifest as a sudden – sometimes brutal and

dangerous – fear response during new or unexpected situations for the horse. It is not always easy to distinguish it from shying, fear, and phobias.

**Shying** occurs when horses confront something unknown to them. They use a natural means of protection that has no direct impact on their welfare state. They back away, snort, and then begin to explore. **Fear** is an instantaneous and more intense emotion felt in the presence of an object, or event, detected or perceived as a danger or threat. In proximity, this alarm system leads to a defence or avoidance response – the fight or flight reaction. The animal is mobilising adaptive faculties and a self-preservation instinct. **Phobia** is different from shying and fear in that it always occurs disproportionately and in anticipation, when the horse has not had sufficient habituation to control any natural responses to the trigger. This is the case when the horse's capacity to adapt has been exceeded.

#### **4. Examples presented and discussed**

On the basis of three concrete and practical examples, these concepts will be explained using the same approach each time, i.e.:

- What the regulation says,
- The point of view of the interests of the equidae,
- The interests of the people involved,
- What the alternatives would be that would allow the same results with less constraint,

- What the recommendations would be,
- The results of the weighing of interests and justification of the constraints,
- The recommendations for implementation

## **5. Perspectives and conclusions**

Equids – horses, ponies, donkeys, and hybrids – are now perceived in a very different way than they used to be. In their lifestyles (leisure, sport, tourism, media, technology, etc.), humans maintain a relationship with them that is quite different from what they develop with most animals. They now consider them as partners or companions, but also appreciate them for their athletic qualities or their work. These roles mark the various ways in which the two species interact. The issue of implementing welfare measures and respecting the inherent value of equids is of paramount importance. In addition to the significance of the breeding, management, and working conditions, the involvement of the parties concerned must be clarified. The primary responsibility for limiting strains lies with the people working in the various fields of the industry (breeding, management, disciplines, daily care, therapies, etc.). They are the ones responsible for weighing, in each situation, the different interests in the various contexts. At the same time, their organisations must also take on the task of adopting an ethical perspective when developing and adapting regulations that protect horses, educational programmes, and breeding goals. It is not

appropriate for them to simply assert the primacy of personal responsibility for the objectives. Knowledge must be made available, distributed, acquired, and applied. For this reason, they have a key role to play in training their members, who are generally unable to take on their obligations if they do not have the appropriate skills.

That said, this report shows that the knowledge necessary for the development of an adequate ethical attitude is lacking in several areas at present. We therefore recommend that the scientists of the equine research network address an increasing number of fundamental and practical issues in the future. The legislative authorities must continue their efforts to improve equine welfare and respect for their dignity, especially in their work or purpose. By funding projects, they must encourage the industry to reflect on ethical issues and help it make decisions and communicate. In this respect, this document emphasises the overriding importance of scientific findings. They should prevail over judgements based on assumptions, emotions, or references to any kind of utopic nature. To clarify what is still to come, we conclude that the current context already contains the main elements that will guide the paths that should be followed. Public concern is manifest, above all through people's demands about the kind of attitudes we should have towards living things; the more prominent a species is in the hierarchy of domestic animals, the higher the expectations of dignity and welfare. This transition poses new challenges to active members of the industry and forces it to look at those challenges from largely unexplored angles, such as the promotion and

publication of good practice. In the future, work should be done on issues related to interspecies relations, communication, and the importance of gender, especially in tourism, event planning, and healthcare. Many perspectives (cultural, ethical, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, sociological, etc.) can then open up.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to assume that the public will continue to express strong and legitimate expectations of the equine industry. In view of the regular questioning of sporting behaviour and of management systems, and the controversy surrounding certain practices, we consider it necessary to not leave the duty of vigilance solely to animal protection movements or to the authorities responsible for enforcing the legislation. If the industry is to retain its social legitimacy, people working with horses and organisations must prevent problems in the first place and periodically carry out an honest weighing of interests. More specifically, they must give top priority to the welfare of the equids, and respect for their inherent worth and their subjectivity, and not just focus on improving these points for the benefit of human beings. We therefore consider that an independent and permanent think tank commission dedicated to ethics in the equine industry be set up and financed by the structures concerned.

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