

A month in the HART of Nepal: part two

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continues discussing his Nepalese adventure, focusing on problems in large animals

Crossing a river to reach some mules for assessment.

AS I mentioned in part one (VT41.44), I have been busy trying to raise the standards of equine welfare in Nepal.

The Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust (HART) wanted to become involved as it was apparent that, during its outreach programme for dogs and cats, other animal welfare issues need to be addressed, such as with mules, horses and livestock. It was quite common for HART director Khageshwar Sharma to get telephone calls from the public about cows lying injured in the street after being hit by vehicles. HART has no facilities to deal with these emergencies and could only pass the information to another welfare group (DREAM), which would follow it up to ensure something would be done. It is seen as part of HART's brief to cooperate and coordinate with other welfare organisations to prevent duplication of work and competition, which has sometimes been a problem in the past.

Cows, calves and water buffalo wander the streets, browsing the kerbsides for grass and anything edible in rubbish bags, which are everywhere. Cows are sacred in the Hindu religion and must not be killed on any account, but that does mean

that anything is done to ensure they don't kill themselves by consuming plastic bags full of rubbish, or nylon ropes. Cows that are very ill, or have broken limbs, must not be euthanised as the penalty can be a huge fine or even prison. Water buffalo are not sacred and they also seem to enjoy a free and easy lifestyle a lot of the time – they are used for ploughing rice fields between crops, and their milk is drunk and made into cheese and butter. However, they are also killed for meat. It was the welfare of the horses, mules and donkeys, which are used to carry people and heavy loads for trekking, that became a larger concern for HART. Under the auspices of Animal Health Training and Consultancy Service (AHTCS), which is expert in equine welfare in Nepal, a plan was evolved to train HART's mostly small animal vets in the techniques of appraising the welfare of equines.

I had numerous meetings with the executive director of AHTCS, a highly articulate, charming man called Dirga Lamichhane, and Dinesh Tiwari, who is more hands-on in the field and the only vet who was qualified in the area to assess the welfare and condition of horses, mules and donkeys.

I also found myself, one Saturday (always a day off in Nepal), at Dhampus, where the village development committee of the Kaski district was holding its annual meeting. I volunteered to accompany Khageshwar, who felt he ought to attend as AHTCS and Dirga sponsored the meeting. It was a rough road through a beautiful valley (leopard country) to the Arba Resource Centre, which is used by AHTCS to train people to improve farming techniques and cooperation between farmers. The intention was to start the meeting at 10am, but, being Nepal, it began at 11am. As the proceeding would be in Hindi, I told Khageshwar I would show my face to support him, and then go for a walk.

Overwhelmed

As soon as we arrived, it was obvious my cunning plan was doomed to failure. I was overwhelmed by kindness, presented with a Hindu prayer scarf and a very large rosette, and placed at the top table as an honoured guest. I was even asked to say a few words, twice – in English fortunately. I mostly spoke about how honoured I was to be received in such a manner and brought greetings and good wishes to all from the UK. The proceedings went on with many speeches and presentations and finished with a very good lunch of daal bhaat, which is a lentil soup with rice and curried vegetables. There was also a chicken curry for meat-eaters. It was worth the wait.

I had to go back to Kathmandu for the Equine Welfare Convergence Meeting, sponsored by the AHTCS, during the second week of my trip. There was to be a series of talks from different welfare groups and I had to deliver a presentation on behalf of HART. With only a few hours' preparation



time, I was fortunate to have Khageshwar at my side and we managed to put together an electronic presentation entitled "Some aspects of equine welfare from a UK perspective". It was very colourful thanks to him and based on my book *How to Save Money on Your Horse Vet Bills*, which I had the foresight to bring out with me.

The drive from Pokhara to Kathmandu is always eventful. The road is bad at the best of times, with potholes deep enough to drown a donkey if they're full of water, which also have to be driven around despite oncoming traffic. It was also the day after an earthquake that had caused the road to drop into the river gorge in a couple of places. The HART four-track vehicle and its driver were up to the task, though, but I did realise we had to do the journey in reverse two days later.

More than 40 delegates attended the conference. The ceremony began with the national anthem and then we all joined hands for the lighting of the Hindu prayer lamp, after which the presentations began. I was third on and I think it went okay – my main point was to promote the thought among owners that if they looked after their animals properly, the animals would look after them by being more productive. However, there was no doubt Animal Nepal's Sudip Koirala's presentation made the most impact, entitled "Blood bricks". The theme was the awful treatment donkeys suffer when they are working in the brick kilns and factories. I hope to present another article about this subject later.

The meeting's aim was to get the welfare groups together for the first time, to present a united front to the Nepalese Government. No animal welfare legislation exists to protect animals, and it is hoped there will be laws in place to promote and enforce better care of all Nepalese animals.

The journey back to Pokhara, most of it in the dark, was another nightmare made

worse by finding the road ahead through a village blocked due to a fatal accident. We eventually found a detour, but it caused further delay as the route was

extreme and we stopped many times to check we were heading the correct way. It also meant we got back to Pokhara very late and were stopped frequently by heavily armed army and police roadblocks.

I had to liaise with Dr Dinesh as we were due to assess the condition of a group of trekking mules in an adjoining valley called Thomsikot. I had already prepared a protocol to follow for these types of examinations, but we agreed to use the AHTCS form as mine was too clinically based (it involved using a stethoscope).

The road to Thomsikot was very rough and steep and meant driving around hairpin bends with 2,000ft drops down to the valley floor. Meeting another vehicle at just the wrong place made it extra scary. Dr Dinesh, obviously a man in the know, chose to travel by motorbike. The HART team were all in the trusty four-track, driven expertly by Ramesh and, just for once, he was not tooting the horn at all the pretty girls he could see – there were no pretty girls on that road. It took two hours to arrive at our destination and then we had to cross two wire-walkway bridges over a raging torrent of a river and through another village before we reached the rendezvous point. There was only one lame, very thin mule that had been left behind because of its condition. However, we got off to a start with this animal, and Dinesh and I filled in the first form jointly.

Terrible sores

We were just finished when a mule train arrived at a gallop. There were about 17 animals and they were going home – and nothing and no one was going to get in their way. However, after feeding and watering, they were amenable to being examined. Their body condition overall was just about okay. All averaged a body score of three, but all had horrible saddle sores due to ill-fitting harnesses. Worst of all were really terrible sores at the base

of the tail due to crupper straps that run under the tail to stop loads shifting. There was only one animal that didn't have these sores and it was about five years old, so it could only be a matter of time.

I really enjoyed my time with the mules and it was only marred by an upset stomach. One thing anyone travelling to a third-world country must do is to always carry loo paper. I did, but for some reason not on this occasion. However, Sivan Ritter came to my aid with some tissues from her pack. You certainly get to know your real friends are in this type of situation.

The journey back was just as bad, but alleviated to some extent because it was dark and you could not see the drop over the edge. Getting back to Pokhara became difficult for me again, as I could feel my stomach preparing for another outburst. It was not helped by Khageshwar, who was driving, stopping to talk with a friend. Eventually I had to tell him and he made it back to the "cottage" where I was staying with great haste. As I rushed through the door, heading for the loo, I was met by a black rat emerging from my bedroom. I did not need any assistance to speed my progress, but if I had it would certainly have helped.

It was a memorable day. I loved working with the mules, although it was distressing to see their sores as nothing could be done for them except dispense some out-of-date under cream. The answer to the problem of sores is properly fitted, padded packs and saddles that are not interchangeable, but that, unfortunately, is unlikely to happen soon. There was no doubt that in the UK these animals would not be allowed to work again until all the infected sores had healed and, equally certain, the same beasts would be out again tomorrow in Nepal regardless of the sores. Enforceable legislation is the answer, but that may still be some time away.

We were in, what I considered, to be a remote valley, but Dinesh told me that we were near a trekking station to Pokhara, and to assess others we would have to be away overnight. Travel is very difficult in the Himalayas.

Nepal is a wonderful country that needs all the help it can get. I don't know whether I made much difference, but I suppose every little helps. HART is doing an amazing job with limited resources and Nepal is a lovely place to visit. The anagram is: Never End Peace And Love – says it all really.

If you would like to help in Nepal, you can get in touch with HART very easily. Email enquiries@hartnepal.org or visit www.hartnepal.org or you can get in contact with me through Veterinary Times. ■



Top: an emaciated lame mule. Above: saddle sores on a horse. Inset: saddle sores are due to ill-fitting saddles or harnesses.

