

Australia - The world's greatest horse-loving nation?

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This article is by Jane Duckworth. She is the author of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?: The Treatment of Horses in Australia*. This book was the first to 'lift the lid' on the state of horse welfare in Australia. She recently published *Not Every Dog Has His Day: The Treatment of dogs in Australia*. For more information about both of her books visit www.doghorsewelfare.com.au

The treatment of many of Australia's horses leaves a lot to be desired. The popular image of Australia as the world's greatest horse loving nation is, in some ways, untrue. Unfortunately the reality for many horses is that they will suffer as a result of poor management, inappropriate training methods, deliberate exploitation, through general misuse or simply being excess to requirements.

'Who cares about horses? It is a myth that Australia is a country of horse lovers. We see ourselves as such, but it's not the truth,' says Peter Fisher, former president of the now defunct National League For Protection of Horses, Australia.

Peter Fisher, who runs a Waler horse stud at Muckleford in central Victoria, ought to know. He has been involved in horse welfare issues for many years, saving Waler horses from the outback and having rescued many neglected and abused horses. He bought a horse named Bo from a farmer after learning that Bo had been kept tethered for almost five years without a break. 'Bo's previous owner spent quite a lot of money on him but just didn't see anything wrong with leaving him constantly tied up,' he said.

What's being done about improving the way many horses are maintained and handled? Is there any recognition that horses are now being increasingly kept as companion animals, often by those with no previous knowledge about their physical and behavioural requirements?

The treatment and welfare of our horses has never been comprehensively studied, yet the Australian horse industry contributes an estimated \$6.2 billion to the Australian economy annually, according to new research published by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC).

According to RIRDC it is comparable with the livestock industry, which contributes around \$7 billion to the economy annually. Australia's thoroughbred industry is bigger than those of France, England and Ireland put together.

While horse racing and associated activities comprise approximately half of the economic contribution, horse businesses, breed and equestrian events and the maintenance of horses are large industries in themselves. Despite this huge industry's far reaching economic impact and the fact that animal welfare in general is attracting increasing interest worldwide, members of the Australian public often demonstrate a poor understanding of basic horse management and training. The number of complaints of cruelty to horses nationwide that the RSPCA have investigated has risen by 13.5 percent according to the latest available figures (RSPCA Annual Statistics 2007-08). Apparently horse welfare and protection groups have anecdotally seen a large increase, exacerbated by the long term drought conditions causing feed to costs to increase markedly.

Peter Fisher has pointed out that, 'many cases of horse cruelty result from ignorance rather than deliberate cruelty.' How did this lack of knowledge come about? In the past, basic horse husbandry was common knowledge (although even many of the traditional ways of caring for and training horses are now being re-examined to determine if welfare is compromised in any way). We are three generations away from the last period when horse transport meant that most people had some contact with and understanding of horses. Horse management skills were frequently developed as part of everyday life.

At the present time parents do not have everyday experience to provide them with answers to horse care issues as their 'horse crazy' children seek to fulfil the dream of horse ownership. First time adult owners are often in the same position. Overall, purchasers generally give far more thought to expected pleasures than the realities and responsibilities of owning a horse. This romantic notion of horse ownership is often the starting point of unintentional neglect.

In Australia horses can be so *inexpensive* to purchase, particularly through the public saleyards. Anyone with a few dollars in their pocket can buy a cheap horse or pony then have no idea how to care for the animal and possibly not have the financial means to pay for the expensive upkeep of an equine companion.

Neglected horses keep welfare groups constantly busy attempting to improve the situation by educating the owner or in some cases, rescuing the animals involved. The number of ill-treated horses and ponies are a huge concern for both animal welfare groups and horse welfare groups, year in and year out.

For instance, four weak and listless ponies were reported to the National League for Protection of Horses (now sadly defunct). The starving animals were kept on a house block in Castlemaine, Victoria, and were left in the care of the absent owner's neighbour who knew very little about horses. The ponies wandered around listlessly over the bare earth, except for patches of an inedible weed, hungry to the point where one was chewing a stick and another was eating the animals' own manure. Coils of loose wire were left lying around the paddock posing a danger to the ponies legs as were the poorly kept fences.

Judith St Mart, a former vice president of the Victorian based Project Hope Horse Welfare Victoria said that, 'it does get a bit much at times and it is heart-breaking to see such humble and trusting companions dragging overgrown feet and bones sticking out at all angles.'

A great deal of animal suffering could be avoided if potential horse owners educated themselves in basic horse husbandry, made themselves aware of the potential cost and the time and labour involved well before a purchase was made.

The cost of keeping a pony club/weekend pleasure horse, ridden two-three times a week with access to good quality pasture-

Feeding	\$40 per week
Agistment- paddock	\$25-50 per week
- full board	\$90 upwards
Rugs	\$150 per year
Farrier/trimmer	\$40-\$80 every 4 - 6 weeks
Dental care	\$70 once a year
Drenching (worms)	\$15 to \$40 every 6 - 8 weeks
Vet costs	\$120 upwards (vaccinations; more for treatment of health problems)

Rough estimations as at January 2010

Proper care of a horse requires a strong commitment to attend to all of its requirements. The correct type and amount of food and fresh water must be supplied. Colts and stallions should be desexed if not used for breeding purposes. Inexperienced horse owners should not consider breeding horses and even experienced horse people should consider if there is a real need to breed. The horse's health must be protected, particularly by regularly vaccinating against diseases, controlling worms and regularly caring for teeth and feet. There must be shelter, provision for regular exercise, a paddock clear of rubbish and poisonous plants, fences kept in good order, social contact with other horses, and adequate supervision.

What happens to owners who fail to meet their responsibilities? The shocking truth is that most will not suffer any penalties. It is very difficult to police animal cruelty. All states and territories regulate animal welfare in their jurisdiction but RSPCA officers, members of the police force and designated officers of the Departments of Agriculture or something similar must enforce the state's Protection of Cruelty to Animals Act.

Reports of neglect and cruelty are made by a member of the public to the RSPCA, the police or a horse welfare group, then the RSPCA must follow up and offer assistance or prosecute if warranted. If a negligent owner is reported the organisation is severely restricted in what action it can take to give the animal immediate alleviation of suffering if the owner refuses to accept advice or assistance, and has little power to remove animals which are in a poor state. In Victoria the RSPCA first has to seek a court order in the Magistrates' Court. The Act does allow a referral to the Minister of Agriculture of a proposal to seize animals from a property, but possibly this has never happened. Horses can and do die waiting while due process is taking place.

An official representative of a horse welfare organisation may be called upon by a concerned member of the public to inspect suspected cases of neglect or abuse, but have no legal empowerment to enter a property or charge an owner. If the owner forbids access to a suffering animal or will the representative to inspect but not assist or relocate it, there is nothing that the organisation can directly do. They can only report the situation to the RSPCA. Fortunately in numerous cases owners do take advice or accept assistance from a horse welfare group or the RSPCA so at least advances to individual horse welfare can be made through education, last minute as it may be.

Many Australians probably do care about horses and companion animals in general, not wishing them to suffer unnecessarily. People that aspire to be involved with horses need to be realistic and knowledgeable about the substantial responsibility that they are considering taking on. The development of responsible attitudes and horse husbandry knowledge must be gained through education and should replace romantic notions of horse ownership that can lead to poor welfare outcomes for horses.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Education: Become a responsible horse owner.

(a) Join a local Pony Club or adult riding club. One of the organisation's main aims is to instil in members the proper care of their animals. For those who already own their own horse and are under 25 (current Victorian age limit) becoming a member of a local Pony Club is an excellent way to receive expert tuition in both horse husbandry and riding. Some clubs have a Riders Without Horses program where non-owners can experience pony club on a borrowed mount.

(b) Talk to friends who have owned horses for some time. You can learn a great deal about the responsibilities of horse ownership by gleaning information from knowledgeable friends. But be warned - the equine scene is full of people who think that they are experts.

(c) Attend a riding centre that is a member of Horse Safety Australia www.horsesafetyaustralia.com.au or Australian Horse Riding Centres Inc. www.horseriding.org.au and therefore have very high standards of instruction and horse management skills. Member centres are committed to a high standard of horse welfare. Some non-member centres are also reputable, but judge for

yourself if the horses appear healthy and if the equipment used is well maintained. There are many so-called riding schools and trail riding establishments that treat their horses poorly, posing a real danger to riders and horses through substandard practices.

(d) Formal training - The internet offers a comprehensive listing of educational establishments and courses relevant to horse husbandry in Australia. Equine Industry (VCE VET) is an accredited Year 11 and 12 certificate in Victoria. Short and Certificate/Diploma courses are run by TAFE and agricultural colleges. Often one day workshops are available covering topics such as basic hoof care, feeding, etc.

Degree/Post Graduate equine studies. Short courses, workshops or day sessions are now commonly run by qualified, experienced individuals who teach horse handling, training or horse care. Watch out for trainers that are travelling to your area to take classes.

(e) Read books on horse care - Be aware! Many books on the market relate to keeping horses in the northern hemisphere. Our Australian lifestyle and environmental conditions are unique, requiring some different horse husbandry methods. Horse Sense: The guide to horse care in Australia and New Zealand is the recommended starting point. There are now a number of informative and entertaining Australian horse magazines available direct from the publishers and from newsagents.

2. Join a horse welfare and/or generalist animal welfare group.

- To strengthen the groups' political clout by increasing membership.
- You can be a passive or active member (helping with agistment, care, transport, fundraising, education of the public etc.)

3. Report - Report suspected neglect or cruelty to either the RSPCA or a horse welfare organisation. Do not confront the owner yourself.

4. Borrow/Lease - To begin with consider 'borrowing' a horse rather than taking on the full responsibility of ownership:

(a) Leasing a horse

- Riding school horse: Some riding centres will consider a lease arrangement. It will be cheaper than buying your own horse and you (or your child) will experience aspects of horse ownership while under an expert's guidance.
- Privately owned horses are sometimes available for lease. This is often because the owner is studying or wants to travel and needs someone to care for their horse at no cost to themselves. Alternatively it may be a much loved animal that they do not want to sell, losing control of its welfare.
- Horse welfare societies often have rescued horses available for lease. Most have a policy of never selling them as they wish to ensure that these horses never suffer abuse again. Many of these horses will not be suitable for beginners as they have suffered psychological as well as physical abuse.

(b) Visit a purpose built educational 'children's farm'. They sometimes run horse-related courses during the school holidays or just allow visiting children to assist in caring for the resident horses.

(c) Join a Pony Club that runs short horse husbandry courses for non-members whose parents are considering the purchase of a horse. Some clubs allow unmounted children to become members. Children participate in theory classes and learn by assisting the instructors when possible.

5. Consider purchasing a 'broken down' horse. Not everyone needs an absolutely sound horse. Many horses that will not stand up to hunting, polo, racing or other hard work because of a previous injury will last for years as pleasure hacks. They can often be bought at a very low figure and can go on in light work, eventually dying of old age. Their disablement may only be a blemish, putting a hack out of the show ring, but still enabling you to get lots of fun and exercise out of them. Before purchase get a vet check to ensure that the horse is still healthy enough for pleasure riding.

6. Both children and adults can learn about aspects of horse care and training by surfing the Internet. Beware of only considering advice from authoritative sites. This can be difficult to ascertain and there will always be some conflicting advice, even from reputable sources. Trainers can differ in their opinions.

For instance, a reputable source would be Pony Club Victoria <http://www.ponyclubvic.org/> Under the Resources Section there is a Horse Facts Sheets entry. Check out this site for reliable, practical information.

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