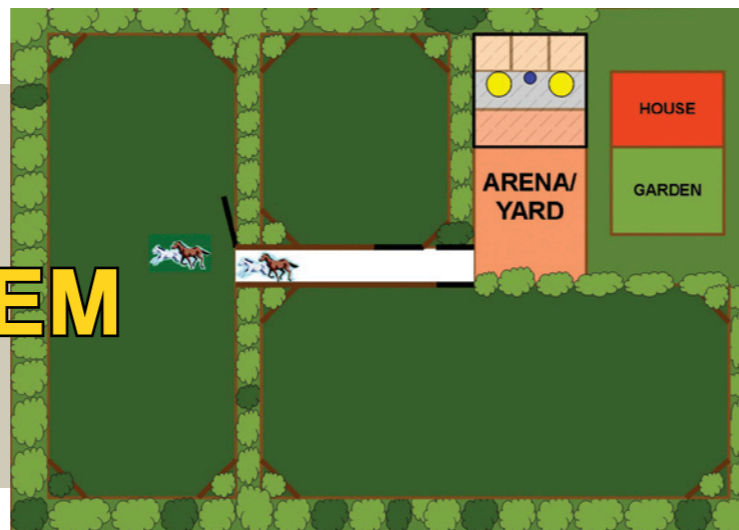


THE CENTRAL POINT SYSTEM

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Good land management is about being able to reduce grazing pressure when necessary and apply it when necessary. Otherwise your land will become degraded and eventually your paddocks will contain lots of weeds and will have bare compacted soil, mud, erosion problems, etc.

In our seminars we teach people about the importance of having yards so that horses can be removed from the pasture when there is not enough growth (and the pasture is at risk of becoming degraded) or when there is too much growth (and the horses are at risk of becoming too fat). These yards need a surface so that horses are not standing around and eating supplementary feed such as hay from mud/dust. The central point system that we advocate takes this idea one step further and has huge benefits for horse owners, horse health, land management and the environment.

This system works by utilising the behaviour of horses to both your and their advantage. It assumes that the horses are kept as a herd. Once you get a basic understanding of how this system works and the many benefits this system can provide you should be able to think of ways that you can incorporate the system – or elements of it – on to your property. See our publication A Horse is a horse (available from our website www.equiculture.com.au) for more information about horse behaviour and how it relates to their management.

In the central point system all the paddocks are linked to a communal yard area by gates and laneways. The communal yard can also be a combined yard/arena in order to further save space and expense on a smaller horse property. Remember, the smaller the property the more the facilities need to be dual purpose whenever possible. It is also best if the communal yard can be within sight of the house, you will see why soon.

Instead of watering points in each paddock water is only situated in the communal yard (there may be more than one water trough in the communal yard depending on the amount of horses in the herd). The communal yard must also have plenty of shade. It can be sand covered or have some other surface.

Bare dirt is not usually an option as it will be dangerously slippery and muddy when wet and dusty when dry. A communal yard can also double up as a riding surface (see the diagram).

Individual yards/stables may also be necessary if you plan to feed horses concentrates (individual yards/stables would also need water obviously). Concentrates can cause conflict and so it is not safe to feed them to a group of horses yarded together. Any necessary hay can be fed either in individual yards/stables or in the communal yard if the horses get on well enough. In this case the surface of this yard needs careful consideration as sand ingestion can lead to sand colic. Using large rubber mats can be a good way to feed horses hay on sand. Hay can also be fed in the laneways even if the paddocks are not in use to encourage horses to move more (see page 20 'A horse is a horse' for other practical ideas on how to integrate forage enrichment into a central point system).

This is an example of how the system works. Let's presume that currently the horses are being kept in the large communal yard overnight (with hay). In the morning the gate is opened to let them out of the communal yard. The horses walk themselves to the paddock that is currently in use and carry out a grazing bout (usually 2 to 3 hours). During this time they are free to return to the communal yard for a drink although they usually do not bother until they have finished grazing. After a grazing bout the horses return to the communal yard for a drink. This copies what horses do 'in the wild', traveling between where water is and where food is, albeit for much less distance in the domestic situation.

After drinking, shade and a soft surface in the communal yard encourages the horses to rest through the middle of the day before returning to the paddock for another grazing bout in the afternoon. At the end of the day the horses return to the yard to await you and any supplementary feed that they may be receiving.

The central point system encourages the horses to return, rest and congregate in an

area of your choosing. You do not have to go and get them, which is particularly handy if you have to see to your horses in the dark after work.

This system also has many other benefits:-

1 It encourages horses to move more (the water is only in the communal yard). Of course this may not be very far on a small horse property but it is better than no movement at all. When the grass is dryer the horses may have to walk backwards and forwards several times during the day for a drink. It all adds up!

2 Horses do not hang around gateways in paddocks (waiting to be let back into the yard) which causes soil compaction and bare areas in gateways. Don't forget the idea is to reduce any unnecessary pressure on your valuable grass covered paddocks.

3 Horses only spend time in the paddock grazing. Paddocks get lots of extra rest and recuperation as horses will loaf (stand around/snooze) in the yard for many hours a day. Without even fastening horses in the yard the pressure on the paddocks is reduced by almost 50%. When horses are fastened in the yard overnight the grazing pressure is reduced even further with very little effort. This is why it works well if the yard is near the house – horses will always hang about where there is human activity because they soon learn that there is more likelihood of getting supplementary feed in this area.

4 The expense of installing water systems to individual paddocks is spared. Only one water trough has to be bought, installed and checked daily. The corresponding compacted/muddy area that surrounds a watering area and the tracks that develop to and from a water trough in a paddock are also avoided.

5 The expense of installing individual paddock shelters is avoided along with the tracks that develop to and from them. Only one shelter has to be bought and constructed and this shelter is potentially used every day of the year. This shelter can also provide partial shade/shelter for the riding area if so desired.



The central point system works by utilising the behaviour of horses to your and their advantage. Importantly it saves money, time and is much more sustainable than traditional horse keeping systems, as well as promoting natural horse behaviour.

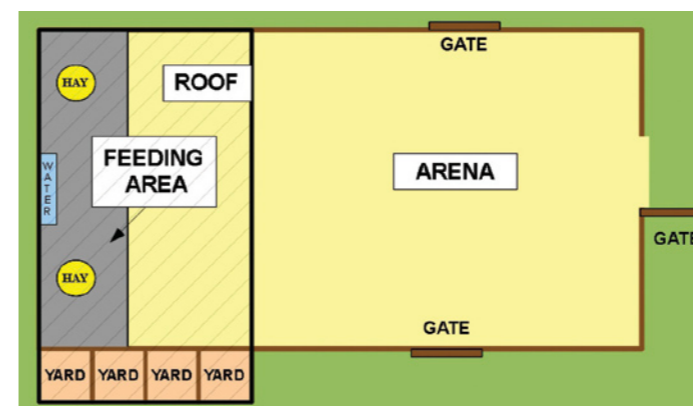


6 If the communal yard is positioned near the house then this means that in times of fire and flood or when you simply want to ride them, horses are near the house or can be called up to the house (or can get themselves to higher ground). It is very easy to train horses to come back to the yard whenever you call by periodically giving them a small treat for coming to you in the yard.

7 This large area also acts as a firebreak in an area that is at risk from bushfire.

8 More manure is concentrated in the yard and less in the paddock. This manure can be collected and composted for great benefits (see our publication Manure, water and vegetation on a horse property available from the eshop on our website www.equiculture.com.au).

9 The amount of time that horses spend grazing a paddock can be strictly controlled if necessary so that the horses can be allowed more grazing bouts when there is enough pasture and less grazing bouts when pasture needs a rest. Alternatively horses that need to have their intake reduced can be managed accordingly. In either case you simply call the horses to the yard (or wait for them to return) and shut the yard gate to prevent them from returning to



the paddock. In this case horses must be fed lower energy hay when fastened in the yard.

This system saves money, time, is much more sustainable than traditional horse keeping systems and fits in well with natural horse behaviour while at the same time allows good property and environmental management.

Take good care of your land and in return it will take care of your horses and the environment. This article is just a brief overview of how this system works. If you own/manage land then it is important that you understand how to take good care of it and in turn it will take good care of your horses. Aim to attend one of our seminars which are usually funded by government bodies – you will learn lots on the day and make invaluable contacts for the future. Join our mailing list (via the website www.equiculture.com.au) and you will be kept up to date with upcoming seminars and information about sustainable horsekeeping.

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