




Essay



Fight against donkey extinction in Ghana: approaches and achievements so far

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Received: 03 Apr 2024 - **Accepted:** 13 May 2024 - **Published:** 05 Jul 2024

Keywords: Donkey, welfare, Ghana

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Cite this article: Anthony Nsoh Akunzule et al. Fight against donkey extinction in Ghana: approaches and achievements so far. PAMJ-One Health. 2024;14(12). 10.11604/pamj-oh.2024.14.12.43496

Available online at: <https://www.one-health.panafrican-med-journal.com/content/article/14/12/full>

Fight against donkey extinction in Ghana: approaches and achievements so far

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Abstract

In Ghana, donkeys are essential to the socio-economic framework, especially in rural areas where they support agriculture and transportation. However, an increasing demand for donkey skins, fuelled by the market for traditional Chinese medicine "ejiao" has led to a drastic reduction in their population. This essay discusses the escalating crisis of donkey depletion, attributing it to the rise of industrial-scale slaughter facilities and the illicit trade. It evaluates the comprehensive response through the Fight Against Donkey Extinction (FADE) project, which includes community education, awareness creation, personnel training and development, legal and policy advocacy, and the formation of donkey value chain networks. These initiatives have successfully reduced illegal donkey slaughters and fostered community engagement, contributing to a significant decline in the donkey hide trade in targeted regions in Ghana. This paper highlights these successes chalked alongside ongoing challenges, illustrating the critical steps taken, and the way forward to preserve donkeys, thereby maintaining their vital role in Ghana's rural economies and safeguarding an important element of Ghanaian heritage and livelihood.

Essay

In the heart of Ghana, where the verdant landscapes whisper tales of resilience and community, an unsettling narrative has begun to unfold, casting a shadow over the symbiotic relationship between humans and one of their most steadfast companions: the donkey [1,2]. Donkeys play a pivotal role in the socio-economic fabric of Ghana, serving as indispensable assets, particularly in rural and semi-arid regions where mechanised farming is less prevalent. These hardy animals are integral for small-scale farming communities, providing a cost-effective and reliable means of transportation and labour. They are primarily used for ploughing fields, carrying water, goods, and sometimes people, across

difficult terrains that are often inaccessible to vehicles. Donkeys are especially valuable during planting and harvesting seasons, where their endurance and ability to work in harsh conditions make them invaluable for ensuring food security and supporting livelihoods as shown in Figure 1A and B. Traditionally celebrated as the unsung workhorse of rural economies, donkeys have increasingly become victims of an exploitative international trade, driven by the demand for their skins for use in traditional Chinese medicine, particularly "ejiao" [3,4]. This burgeoning trade has not only precipitated a drastic reduction in donkey populations [5] but has also thrown into sharp relief the broader consequences for food security, nutrition, and the livelihoods of rural communities in Northern Ghana [6]. The genesis of this crisis can be traced back to the establishment of industrial-scale slaughter facilities, such as the one operated by Blue Coast Industry in Walewale [7], initiated with the capacity to process hundreds of donkeys daily, these facilities have significantly accelerated the depletion of donkey populations. The repercussions of this burgeoning trade are multifaceted, affecting not just the ecological balance but also the socio-economic fabric of rural communities that depend heavily on these animals for transportation, agriculture, and income [8,9]. Alarmingly, the situation has been compounded by instances of theft and the gruesome discovery of donkey carcasses, stripped of their hides and abandoned, signaling a disturbing disregard for animal welfare and community well-being as displayed in Figure 2. Recognizing the severity of the situation, a concerted effort involving government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities has emerged to address this looming disaster. This essay explores the multifaceted strategies that have been deployed to combat the extinction of donkeys in Ghana. It examines the effectiveness of these measures, from stringent legal frameworks and anti-poaching efforts to community education and conservation initiatives. By delving into the successes and ongoing challenges, this paper aims

to highlight the critical steps being taken to preserve an animal integral to Ghanaian livelihoods and heritage.

In response to this endangering crisis, the Fight Against Donkey Extinction (FADE) project was launched in regions most affected by this trade. Operating across the Upper East and North-East regions of Ghana, FADE focuses on halting the illegal slaughter of donkeys and the trade of their skins. Efforts include community education, monitoring of donkey populations, and direct intervention in cases of illegal trading activities. This project is a vital component of the national strategy to preserve the donkey population and, by extension, the rural economies they support. Furthermore, GAPNET and Donyepa have undertaken a series of targeted efforts under the FADE project. These activities span from legislative advocacy, public awareness campaigns through radio talks, billboards, community engagements, workshops, meetings with Municipal and District Assemblies, monitoring, evaluation, and learning meetings with traditional rulers, and international collaboration, each with specific activities designed to mitigate the trade's impact and safeguard the welfare of donkeys and to critically re-align achievements with challenges moving forward to ensure a formidable and sustained fight against this illicit and barbaric trade. To augment and embolden the activities of FADE projects, there have been efforts to obtain legal positions and policies to deal with the donkey hide trade in Ghana. The Veterinary Services Directorate of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture issued an administrative circular dated 21st October 2016, on "Ban on the slaughter and export of donkey hides" to embolden their stance on this subject matter [10]. In recent years, GAPNET and Donyepa have held policy related meetings, and organised "Development a National Advocacy Action Plan for the Preservation and the Welfare of Donkeys in Ghana" for senior policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and development partners. The two NGOs have actively engaged in drafting proposals for national legislation aimed at

banning the mass slaughter of donkeys and regulating any aspect of the donkey trade. These include detailed policy briefs submitted to governmental bodies outlining the economic, environmental, and social rationale for such legislation. Workshops have been convened to bring together policymakers, animal welfare experts, community leaders, and affected stakeholders to discuss the formulation and implementation of policies protecting donkeys. A notable workshop in Tamale gathered diverse views, leading to a unified call for legislative action. GAPNET and Donyepa organized a meeting in March 2023 in Accra with the Parliamentary Committee for Food, Agriculture, and Cocoa Affairs to inform members about the dire consequences of the donkey skin trade. This effort aimed to rally legislative support for policies protecting donkeys from mass slaughter and illicit trade.

Concerning advocacy and public awareness of this fight against of donkey hide trade in Ghana, a comprehensive media strategy has been deployed, utilizing TV, radio, print, and online platforms to educate the public on the importance of donkeys to rural livelihoods and the consequences of the hide trade on imminent donkey extinction. Documentaries and news reports have been produced and disseminated widely. Given this effort, GAPNET and Donyepa contributed to discussions at The Donkey Sanctuary's event in Nigeria, raising awareness about the donkey hide trade's impact in West Africa. In addition, targeted workshops and seminars have been held in Bolgatanga, Sirigu Bongo, Walewale, Gambaga, communities heavily impacted by the trade, focusing on educating locals about donkey welfare, the environmental and social costs of the trade, and legal frameworks protecting animals. Events such as marches, rallies, and information sessions in public squares and schools have been organized, creating platforms for community engagement and discussion on the issue. GAPNET and Donyepa spearheaded a National Awareness Creation in 2019 that utilised TV, radio, and

newspapers to educate the public on the donkey hide trade and its impact on animal welfare. From the onset of the project till 2023, there have been 24 community radio talk shows successfully organized in local dialects e.g. in "Gruuni" and "Mampruli" languages on the illegal operation of donkey mass slaughter and export of hides. In addition, radio discussions and jingles are being played by two radio stations "Dreamz FM Station in Bolgatanga and Wale FM Station in Walewale" and awareness creation has increased in all three targeted districts, which has reduced the mass slaughter of the donkey species, which has successfully led to the closure of the Blue Coast Ghana Limited in Walewale. At the local level, there is a bye-law that has been passed for the West Mamprusi Municipal Assembly banning the slaughter of donkeys in the Municipality.

In the effort to attain and ensure community engagement and support to curb the situation, donkey value chain networks have been established to provide donkey owners with a platform for collective action and support. They serve as a means for sharing best practices in donkey care, advocating for rights, and accessing resources. GAPNET and Donyepa implemented the Fight Against Donkey Extinction (FADE) project in 2022, leading to the formation of five (5) donkey owner associations in Sirigu, Bongo, Bolgatanga, Walewale and Nalerigu, which are considered a major thrust of FADE as indicated in Table 1. In addition, the FADE project aimed at ensuring the donkeys' slaughter points are regulated and monitored. This was attained through organizing one community meeting in Nalerigu in the East Mamprusi Municipal to sensitize stakeholders as well as the formation of a Donkey Value Chain Network in the East Mamprusi Municipal. As a result of the formation of the Donkey Value Chain Network in Bongo District, the district has stopped issuing permits for the slaughter of donkeys, which has resulted in a significant reduction in the mass slaughter of donkeys in the district. In addition, the Donkey Value Chain Networks in the district carries out constant monitoring visits with the

Ghana Police Service and Officers from the Environmental Health Personnel of the Bongo District Assembly, sometimes as even late as at midnight to help clamp down on illegal activities of the donkey skin traders. Furthermore, training programs have been developed to offer donkey owners education on animal welfare, as well as training in alternative livelihoods to reduce dependence on income from the donkey skin trade. These programs include veterinary care workshops, sustainable farming techniques, and business skills development. The FADE project in February 2024, in Bolgatanga Upper East Region trained 18 veterinary officers in donkey welfare, basic disease recognition, treatment of donkeys and handling of donkeys; which was facilitated by experts from Brooke West Africa. Initiatives to recognize the value of donkeys and the exemplary care provided by some owners have been introduced. This initiative also recognized donkey owners with a National Best Donkey Welfare Award, fostering community engagement and support for donkey welfare.

Last but not least, international collaboration and research efforts have not been left out in the bid to find solutions to ending the donkey hide trade. Collaborations with organizations like The Donkey Sanctuary and Brooke West Africa have bolstered local efforts with international expertise, funding, and advocacy support. These partnerships have facilitated global awareness and action against the trade. Comprehensive research initiatives have been launched to document the trade's effects on local communities, animal welfare, and ecosystems. The research initiatives provide critical evidence-based for advocacy, policy-making, and public education efforts. Given this, GAPNET and Donyepa facilitated a two-week research study investigating the welfare of equids at slaughter in the Bolgatanga Municipality [11] and the donkey owners' knowledge and perception on reproduction [12]. This research contributed to a deeper understanding of the trade's impacts and supports advocacy efforts. The NGO further collaborated with Nik Wook to

develop a video addressing donkey welfare and the skin trade, supported financially by CEVA, Inc. (CEVA). This video broadcasted globally, helped to educate a wide audience on the issue. Efforts have been made to engage with neighboring countries to tackle the regional dimensions of the donkey hide trade including dialogues and agreements aimed at monitoring and regulating cross-border movements of donkeys to prevent illegal trade.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the multifaceted approach to curbing the donkey hide trade in Ghana demonstrates a robust and comprehensive response to complex issues confronting donkey conservation. By addressing legislative gaps, raising public awareness, forming donkey owners' networks, engaging communities directly, and leveraging international support, stakeholders are making significant strides toward safeguarding donkeys' welfare and ensuring they remain a vital part of rural livelihoods and agri-food ecosystems. It is noteworthy that efforts to initiate ban legislation have not yet been successful, in particular the lack of laws/decrees at the national level. The specificity of these efforts underlines the commitment to a sustainable and ethical approach to animal welfare and trade. Additionally, calls for a specialised or master programme for training in animal welfare are recommended in addition to engaging the security services extensively to help enforce the ban on the skin trade; to work towards closing all slaughter or skin processing centres/factories in Bolgatanga; and communities' members and chiefs should be continuously engaged to support in the fight.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

All authors have read and agreed to the final manuscript.

Acknowledgments

The Ghana Poultry Network (GAPNET) and Donyepa, wish to express sincere appreciation to Brooke United Kingdom through their affiliate, Brooke West Africa, Dakar, Senegal, who provided funds without which the activities of the Fight Against Donkey Extinction (FADE) Project in Ghana would not have been possible. We also gratefully, acknowledge the support by the Paramount Chiefs of Walewale and Sirigu for the outstanding support to the project, the staff of the regional offices of the veterinary services of the Upper East and North-East Regions and the Staff of the Departments of Agriculture of the East Mamprusi; West Mamprusi, Bolgatanga Municipals and Bongo and Kassena-Nankana West District Assemblies for their exceptional partnership in this project.

Table and figures

Table 1: donkey owner associations in Ghana formed through fight against donkey extinction project

Figure 1: A) donkey used for carrying agricultural products from the farm; B) donkey used for carting domestic products, Nanbango, November 2023

Figure 2: donkeys being carried in a tricycle to be slaughtered

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Table 1: donkey owner associations in Ghana formed through Fight Against Donkey Extinction Project

Name of donkey owner association	Year association was formed	Membership		Communities forming association	Municipal/district
		Male	Female		
Sirigu Donkey Owners Association	2022	15	5	Sirigu, Yua, Kandiga, Mirigu, Nabango	Kassena Nankana
Bongo Donkey Owners Association	2022	17	3	Bongo	Bongo District
Bolgatanga Donkey Owners Association	2022	14	6	Bolgatanga	Bolgatanga Municipal
Walewale Donkey Owners Association	2022	19	1	Walewale	West Mamprusi
Nalerigu Donkey Owners Association	2023	16	4	Gambaga/Nalerigu	East Mamprusi

Source: GAPNET/Donyepa-2024



Figure 1: A) donkey used for carrying agricultural products from the farm; B) donkey used for carting domestic products, Nanbango, November 2023



Figure 2: donkeys being carried in a tricycle to be slaughtered