

Animal welfare

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World's donkeys being 'decimated' by demand for Chinese medicine



Donkeys graze in Magosane village, in South Africa's North West province. Photograph: Mujahid Safodien/AFP/Getty Images

Half global population could be slaughtered in next five years for ejiao industry, warns report

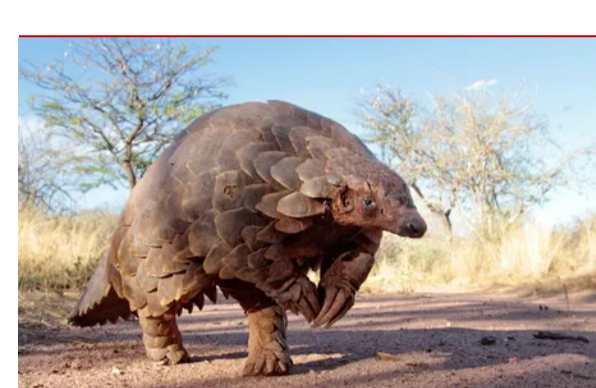
Half the world's donkey population could be wiped out in the next five years, as millions are slaughtered for their hides to meet rising demand for a traditional Chinese medicine.

It is estimated that 4.8m donkey hides a year are needed to satisfy demand for a gelatin-based traditional medicine called ejiao, according to a new report from the Donkey Sanctuary. At the current pace, the global donkey population of 44m would be halved over the next five years, the report warns.

Donkey populations in Brazil have declined by 28% since 2007, by 37% in Botswana and by 53% in Kyrgyzstan, and there are fears the populations in Kenya and Ghana could also be decimated by the skin trade.

The report reveals how donkeys - many stolen from communities who rely on the animals for their livelihoods - are transported on long journeys without access to food or water, with up to 20% dying on route.

It said broken legs were commonplace, with sightings of severed hooves and lower legs on the ground at offloading sites, and donkeys are often dragged by their ears and tails.



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Donkeys being unloaded for slaughter. Photograph: The Donkey Sanctuary

"The welfare infringements are absolutely horrendous in some of the places that donkeys are being slaughtered for this trade," said Faith Burden, the director of research and operational support at the Donkey Sanctuary. "The scale is much greater than we were aware of before."

Demand is so high that even pregnant mares, young foals, and sick and injured donkeys are being rounded up for slaughter, and since injury and illness often do not affect the quality of the hide, traders have little incentive to ensure humane treatment, the report said.

The donkey hides are used to make gelatine, a key ingredient of ejiao, which has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for thousands of years and is believed to improve blood circulation and treat conditions like anaemia.

Donkey numbers in **China** have fallen by 76% since 1992, with the country turning to global imports to fill the gap.



Donkey skins drying in the sun at a licensed donkey slaughterhouse in Baringo, Kenya. Photograph: Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images

The Donkey Sanctuary said investment in donkey farming was needed to replenish numbers, but it could take 20 years to reach the levels required for the ejiao industry.

Burden said: "Donkeys are very slow to reproduce; a donkey mare carries their foal for a year and they're very slow to reach maturity. Their fertility rates are also poor under farmed conditions, which means that farming tends to have an issue with producing enough offspring to satisfy demand for the raw products."

In total, 18 countries have taken action to tackle the donkey hide industry, but even where the slaughter of donkeys has been outlawed, such as in Ghana and Mali, lack of regulation means the practice often continues or donkeys are shipped over borders to be slaughtered elsewhere, the report claims.

Donkeys support about 500 million people in some of the most impoverished parts of the world, and since the booming skin trade has driven up donkey prices, owners struggle to replace their animals when they are stolen. The cost of a donkey in Kenya increased from £78 to £156 between 2016-19.

The report also raises concerns the unregulated skin trade could lead to the spread of disease among equines, but also to humans through zoonotic diseases such as anthrax and tetanus.

The **Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine** (RCHM) in the UK said it strongly condemned the practice and believed it was unethical and unnecessary in modern Chinese medicine. In the UK it is illegal for herbal practitioners to prescribe animal products.

It advocates ethical plant-based alternatives or the use of beef, pork or chicken gelatine as a dietary food supplement instead.



A customer shops for ejiao, or donkey-hide gelatin, at a pharmacy in Nantong, China. Photograph: Imaginetchina Limited/Alamy Stock Photo

Martin John, a RCHM council member, said: "It [ejiao] has a medicinal use but it's not acceptable to decimate populations of donkeys for its production."

The Donkey Sanctuary acknowledged the importance of the donkey hide ingredient in Chinese cultural heritage and called for the ejiao industry to accelerate efforts to find sustainable alternatives, such as artificially grown, donkey-derived collagen, while cutting ties with the global donkey skin trade.

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