Improving Horse Welfare through Assessment and Feedback

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Development of Methods for Improving Horse Welfare through Assessment and Feedback

Abstract
Horse welfare is a multi-dimensional concept involving both mental and physical aspects. In the present thesis a holistic approach to assessing welfare is used through the Welfare Quality® (WQ) principles and criteria. The aim of this thesis was to develop a protocol in line the WQ® system for assessing horse welfare in Sweden and to develop a system for delivering feedback from assessments to horse owners.

In the first study an extensive literature review and discussions with national and international experts resulted in the horse welfare assessment protocol (HWAP). A pilot study showed that HWAP provided a firm basis for monitoring welfare, with high repeatability and feasibility for field use.

The second study compared an updated version of the HWAP to the official protocol (OP) used in Swedish official controls of horse welfare. Results indicated that the added level of detail and more animal based measures in the HWAP provided a more thorough welfare assessment of the individual animal than the OP methodology.

The third study used a questionnaire to investigate Swedish horse owners’ decision making on the welfare of their horses and what preferences they had regarding feedback from welfare assessments. The results indicated a demand for systematic welfare assessments to provide solid information and scientifically based advice. The results were used to develop a database allowing the horse owners online access to the feedback related to the welfare assessments of their horses.

The fourth and final study evaluated how the amount of feedback from assessments (using HWAP) affected changes in horse welfare. The results showed no clear differences between the two groups and it was suggested that a six month interval between assessments is inadequate to observe significant changes. The study indicated that the educational level of the stable managers does not appear to affect the change in actual horse welfare status.

The thesis can be used as a basis for assessing horse welfare and providing horse owners with feedback. It provides an insight into the complicated subject of changing horse owners’ behaviour, which is indirectly measured through horse welfare assessments.

Keywords: assessment, equine, feedback, horse welfare, implementation

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