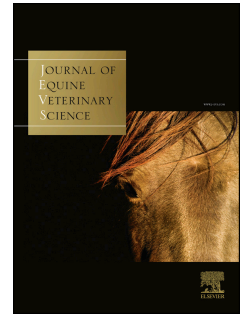


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The Current Situation and Trend of Donkey Industry in Europe

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## The current situation and trend of donkey industry in Europe

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### Abstract

Due to the mechanization in agriculture and in transports, the number of donkeys reared in Europe was reduced of 50% in the last 20 years and more than 80% since the middle of the last century. During this period, no attention was devoted to the breeding selection and biodiversity conservation, with the results that, nowadays, most of European breeds of donkey are threatened of extinction. The remaining donkey, in Europe, are employed for niche purposes as mule production or maintenance of soil and landscape. The consumption of donkey meat is not popular in Europe and a few animals are sent to the slaughterhouse. A new interest is growing in Europe for donkey milk, mostly for human consumption, but also for the production of beauty products. Marginal areas of donkey employment are the social and leisure uses. In spite the fact that interest for donkey in Europe is very marginal, and that very few or even no funding for research were provided from national or European authorities, more or less one third of paper published on different aspect of donkey sciences in the last 20 years where produced in Europe.

**Keywords:** donkey, Europe, uses, research

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### 1. Introduction

Donkeys (*Equus asinus*) were domesticated in Northeast Africa around 6,000-7,000 years ago and played a key role in the expansion of human populations as well as in trading activities across the Old World. Today, donkeys are still working animals that contribute to the subsistence of millions of people in less industrialized countries.

In Europe, before the Second World War, donkeys were employed as tractor force, and transport of people and goods in agriculture, e.g. milk, hay, mostly in South-West part of the Continent; what it is now a car for a family was at that times a donkey. With the improvement of mechanization in agriculture, the development of the automobile industry and with the progressive movement of people from the country to the towns, the importance and the number of donkeys dramatically fell. As a consequence of low profitability, small farms and marginal lands have been progressively abandoned with serious consequences for the management of countryside and for the contrast to adverse natural events. Today, European agriculture is more and more intensive and concentrated in limited areas with dramatic consequences for the quality of the environment to which European Citizens are exposed, on daily basis. Moreover, intensive agriculture and livestock farming result in soil exhaustion and groundwater pollution and raise questions in the public related to the type of crops farmed and to the quality of animal well-being. The donkey has been the livestock species most affected by this industrialization, depopulation of rural districts and mechanization of agriculture: this has led to a population decline of up to 80% in the twentieth century resulting in a dramatic situation of donkeys [1] and in the lack of information on donkey's numbers, breeds and uses in Europe.

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