

**PROTECTING LIVELIHOODS
IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND
REALISING BRAZIL'S GLOBAL
BIOECONOMY AGENDA**



**THE DONKEY
SANCTUARY**



THE ROLE OF DONKEYS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



In 2018, the Regional Council of Veterinary Medicine of Bahia predicted that donkeys would become extinct in Brazil. This would not only mean the loss of a culturally significant animal but would violate the Federal Constitution which prohibits activities that lead to the extinction of a species.



Introduction

Brazil's G20 Presidency centres on championing the bioeconomy – leveraging biological resources and innovative technologies to address global environmental challenges, while advancing rural economies, women's empowerment and indigenous rights.

The impact of this great work, however, is undermined by Brazil's continued trade in donkey skins. Brazil has fallen behind the international community, including the African Union which, in February 2024, agreed to a moratorium on the slaughter of donkeys and export of their skins for at least the next 15 years.

As the world focuses on Brazil and the G20 summit, domestic legislation must align with the Government's commitment to the bioeconomy. The rights of indigenous communities, subsistence farmers and other vulnerable populations must be put on an equal footing with traditional economic sectors.

By recognising the deep link between donkeys, rural communities and biodiversity and progressing Bill no. 2387/2022, Brazil can take its place amongst the growing number of countries, including those in the African Union, who have committed to end the donkey skin trade. Doing so will provide tangible evidence of Brazil's commitment to the bioeconomy.

DONKEYS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Donkeys play a unique and indispensable role in the lives of millions of people across the Global South. They enable families to access water, transport goods and earn an income. Donkeys are the key to survival for many families in Africa, Asia and the Americas.^{1,2,3,4}

This is particularly true for women. Without a donkey, women are often forced to carry the burden otherwise carried by the donkey. This has health implications and can limit women's capacity to earn income and care for children. For many women, families and communities, donkeys are a pathway out of poverty and the difference between destitution and modest survival.⁵

Donkeys are at the heart of rural economies globally. They are central to a bioeconomy and an economic system that uses renewable biological resources to produce goods, services and energy sustainably and efficiently. Donkeys are an important symbol, in Brazil and across the Global South, of rural good living and a traditional way of life.



DONKEYS ENABLE FAMILIES TO ACCESS WATER, TRANSPORT GOODS AND EARN AN INCOME



In February 2024, all member states of the African Union agreed to a moratorium on the slaughter of donkeys for the purpose of exporting their skins and other products for at least the next 15 years. This was in recognition of the socio-economic contribution made by donkeys, and the need to protect them from the brutality of the trade through welfare legislation.

“Preserving donkeys in Africa holds profound significance beyond their role as traditional work animals. These resilient creatures are integral to rural livelihoods, serving as vital assets in transportation, agriculture, and economic sustenance for communities across the continent. Their welfare is not merely a matter of compassion but a strategic imperative for maintaining socio-economic stability and ecological balance.”

African Union InterAfrican Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR)





BRAZIL'S DONKEY SKIN TRADE

Donkeys occupy a unique and important place in Brazil's history and culture. But Brazil's donkey herd is one of many targeted by an opportunistic and extractive global trade in donkey skins used to produce the Traditional Chinese Medicine *ejiao*. The global trade has caused some local donkey populations to plummet and has placed unprecedented and relentless pressure on national herds in many countries. Brazil's donkey population is in steep decline, reducing from 974,688 in 2011⁶ to 376,874 in 2017.⁷ According to government data, 231,934 donkeys were slaughtered between 2018 and 2023.



REDUCTION IN THE DONKEY POPULATION BETWEEN 2007 AND 2017 IN BRAZIL

The northeastern donkey is considered an important genetic resource, and the loss of this biodiversity is already at a delicate point of no return.⁸

Donkeys are captured and purchased from multiple locations before being mixed and transported long distances, often across state borders and without documentation. They are routinely deprived of food, water, rest and veterinary care for the duration of the journey.

This trade poses a disease risk to equines and other animals; causes great animal suffering; tarnishes Brazil's reputation as a global bioeconomy leader; and undermines international efforts, particularly those of the African Union, to protect people who rely on donkeys for their survival.

The trade benefits only a small number of traders. The true cost is paid by donkeys, people, the agribusiness sector and Brazil's reputation, all of which are put at risk.

“ In November 2018, the State Ethics, Bioethics and Animal Welfare Commission (CEEBB) of the State Veterinary Medicine Council of Bahia (CRMV-BA) issued a technical report requesting the suspension of donkey slaughter activities in Brazil. We concluded that the production chain of donkeys for slaughter does not exist and is therefore unsustainable. Scientific publications that analyzed national data confirm the drastic reduction of the Northeastern herd, which corresponds to 86% of the national population, and puts the species at risk of extinction in the country. The risk of extermination of the Northeastern Donkey is even more serious, as it is associated with high health risks (for people and animals). And we can also highlight the economic unfeasibility of producing donkeys for slaughter, also exhaustively demonstrated technically in national and international studies. I would like to add that the CRMV-BA supports all chains of animal products, as long as they are established within the technical and scientific parameters contained in national standards and regulations.”

Dr. Chiara Albano, Professor at the School of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science at the Federal University of Bahia and member of the CEEBB of CRMV-BA.

Risk to the domestic horse industry

Brazil is home to over 5 million horses⁹ and the equine industry contributes approximately R\$16 billion to the economy every year.^{10,11} A single crioula breed horse can be worth as much as R\$16.5 million and the industry is far too valuable to be risked for a trade with minimal benefits. The movement of animals has inherent risks and the spread of a disease for which euthanasia is compulsory could prove highly damaging to Brazil's lucrative horse industry.

The death of tens of thousands of donkeys across West Africa in 2019¹² demonstrated the devastation that can be caused by the spread of disease. This was largely attributed to equids being transported along routes commonly used for the donkey skin trade.



Thyago Emmanuel Araújo

“ On February 1, 2019, ADAB was notified of a property with 694 donkeys crowded together, in a life-threatening situation and in disagreement with animal welfare. An ADAB team was immediately dispatched to the location, where they found the mistreatment and the presence of dead animals. Upon finding out what had happened, the property was immediately closed off due to the unknown origin of the animals, since according to reports from the farm owners... the animals arrived without the animal transit guide - GTA. The Public Prosecutor's Office was informed of the situation of the animals and the sanitary procedures that would be adopted. An official blood serum collection was carried out by veterinarians and state agricultural inspectors from ADAB and forwarded to the Federal Laboratory for Agricultural Defense for testing of glanders and EIA (Equine Infectious Anemia) of all equines on the property.... On April 29, 2019, after a confirmatory examination, 08 (eight) donkeys were identified as positive for glanders and 05 (five) for EIA.”

Agricultural Defense Agency of Bahia 2019.¹³

THE BRAZILIAN DONKEY: A GENOME UNIQUE TO THE NORTHEAST

Brazilian donkeys are recognised as a genetic resource¹⁴ and scientists from around the world have mapped the family tree of donkeys, demonstrating unequivocally the importance of preserving the genetic heritage of these species across the globe.¹⁵

Studies show that, when a species becomes extinct, the microorganisms that live in harmony with that species look for new hosts and this can contribute to the emergence of new infectious diseases, even new pandemics.¹⁶

The Living Planet Index tracks changes in the relative abundance of wild species populations over time¹⁷ and shows an average 69% decrease in relative abundance of monitored wildlife populations between 1970 and 2018.¹⁸ Latin America shows the greatest regional decline in average population abundance (94%).¹⁹

We are crossing a delicate point of no return in relation to the loss of biodiversity²⁰ and must take urgent steps to mitigate the decline in species.



PROGRESS TOWARDS ENDING THE TRADE

Many groups and individuals have expressed support for an end to Brazil's donkey skin trade including national and state congressmen; the Regional Council of Veterinary Medicine; the Brazilian Association of Meat Exporting Industries, horse breeders; universities and small and largescale farmers.

Bill no. 2387/2022, to prohibit the slaughter of equids and the trade of their meat, skins and/or any part for consumption or export, passed the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, Livestock, Supply and Rural Development Commission (May 24, 2023) and the Environment and Sustainable Development Commission (November 22, 2023).

“Several leaders related to the agricultural production sector, such as equine farming, the animal protein industry, universities, professional councils of veterinary medicine and animal husbandry, support the end of the slaughter and trade of donkey skins, understanding that in the risk-benefit analysis there is no significant gain for the national economy and, on the other hand, it involves numerous risks that can cause serious harm to agribusiness and public health.”

Dr. José Roberto Pinho de Andrade Lima, Veterinarian, PhD in Public Health from the Institute of Public Health of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA); Professor at the Higher School of Defense, Ministry of Defense.



LEVERAGING INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR A SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE

Brazil is well placed to support China by harnessing innovative technologies for collagen production, championing a sustainable alternative to *ejiao* that would help place Brazil at the forefront of global research and development.

Unprecedented advancements in cellular agriculture and collagen production provide a promising option for the future of *ejiao*. Cell-based, donkey-derived collagen that performs identically to current forms across the entire functional and nutritional repertoire is now a realistic prospect. Discussions are already underway with the Federal University of Paraná to progress this opportunity.

“For the first time in human history, we will be able to uncouple products such as collagen from the killing of animals. Many other benefits will follow, as the transition for cellular agriculture also means more efficient production processes, less environmental damage, decreased antibiotic use and lower risks of zoonotic and foodborne diseases.”

Dr Carla Molento, PhD in Animal Science, Federal University of Paraná.



GLOBAL LEADERSHIP FROM BRAZIL

There is no place in the bioeconomy for the extractive trade in donkey skins – a trade that undermines the principles of sustainable use and biological resource conservation and that has the potential to decimate rural economies.

As a global leader, and champion of the bioeconomy, Brazil has an obligation to recognise the critical role that donkeys play across the Global South and ensure that domestic legislation is in alignment with the country's ambitious bioeconomy agenda.

Ending the trade in donkey skins would send a clear and resounding signal of Brazil's leadership of – and commitment to – the global bioeconomy. A ban on donkey slaughter will serve to protect far more valuable industries, will help create more jobs, deliver higher value exports and economic growth to benefit the many, not just the few.

In taking this step, Brazil will join many others in the Global South, not least the African Union and, as the world looks towards Brazil's G20 leadership, there will be an appreciation that actions speak louder than words.

REFERENCES

1. Hassan M, Steenstra F & Udo H 2013, 'Benefits of donkeys in rural and urban areas in Northwest Nigeria, *African Journal of Agricultural Research*, 8(48), pp. 6202-6212
2. Marshall and Zahra Ali, 2000 in Starkey P and Fielding D (eds), *Donkeys, people and development*. A resource book of the Animal Traction Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (ATNESA).
3. Maggs H, Ainslie A & Bennett R 2021, 'Donkey ownership provides a range of income benefits to the livelihoods of rural households in Northern Ghana,' *Animals*, 11(11), p.3154
4. Saville K, Bambara C, Marry A & Perry B 2020, 'Invisible livestock' – On the central roles of working horses, donkeys and mules on the smallholder farms that feed the world,' available at <https://www.ilri.org/news/invisible-livestock-central-roles-working-horses-donkeys-and-mules-smallholder-farms-feed>
5. Geiger M, Hockenhull J, Buller H, Engida G, Jemal Kedir M, Goshu L, Getachew M, Banerjee A, Burden & Whay H 2023, 'Being with Donkeys: Insights into the Valuing and Wellbeing of Donkeys in Central Ethiopia,' *Society and Animals*, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-bja10134>
6. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) 2011, *Censo agropecuário 2011*, available at ftp://ftp.ibge.gov.br/Producao_Pecuaria/Producao_da_Pecuaria_Municipal/2012/tabelas_pdf/tab13.pdf
7. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) 2017, *Censo agropecuário 2017*, available at https://censos.ibge.gov.br/agro/2017/templates/censo_agro/resultadosagro/pecuaria.html?localidade=0&tema=75642
8. Alves J, Oliveira C, Escodro P, Pinto L, Costa R & Camargo G 2022, 'Genetic origin of donkeys in Brazil,' *Tropical Animal Health and Production*, 54(5), p 291
9. Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply 2021, personal communications received 11 February 2021 from Cabinet of MAPA in response to Freedom of Information request.
10. ESALQ-USP. Luiz de Queiroz School of Agriculture, 'Review of the study of the complex horse agribusiness,' *University of São Paulo*, available at <https://www.gov.br/agricultura/pt-br/assuntos/camaras-setoriais-tematicas/documentos/camaras-setoriais/equideocultura/anos-anteriores/revisao-do-estudo-do-complexo-do-agronegocio-do-cavalo>
11. Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply 2016, 'Review of the study of the horse agribusiness complex,' available at <https://www.gov.br/agricultura/pt-br/assuntos/camaras-setoriais-tematicas/documentos/camaras-setoriais/equideocultura/anos-anteriores/revisao-do-estudo-do-complexo-do-agronegocio-do-cavalo/view>.
12. The Donkey Sanctuary 2019, 'Under the Skin: Update on the global crisis for donkeys and the people who depend on them,' available at <https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/about-us/our-international-work/issues/donkey-meat-milk-and-skin/full-report>
13. Agricultural Defense Agency of Bahia, 'Technical note – ADAB maintains preventative measures in relation to donkeys,' available at <http://www.adab.ba.gov.br/noticias/nota-tecnica-adab-mantem-medidas-preventivas-em-relacao-aos-asininos/>
14. Alves J, Oliveira C, Escodro P, Pinto L, Costa R & Camargo G 2022, 'Genetic origin of donkeys in Brazil,' *Tropical Animal Health and Production*, 54 (5), p. 291
15. Todd E et al. 2022, 'The genomic history and global expansion of domestic donkeys,' *Science*, 377(6611), pp.1172-1180, doi.org/10.1126/science.abo3503
16. 'Tip of the iceberg': is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19? Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe> - there is also another source, a scientific paper: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1469-0691.2008.02691.x>
17. McRae L, Deinet S & Freeman R 2017, 'The diversity-weighted Living Planet Index: Controlling for taxonomic bias in a global biodiversity indicator,' *PLOS ONE*, 12(1), doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0169156
18. WWF 2022, 'Living planet report. Building a nature-positive society,' World Wildlife Fund, available at https://wwflpr.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr_2022_full_report.pdf
19. WWF 2022, 'Living planet report. Building a nature-positive society,' World Wildlife Fund, available at https://wwflpr.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr_2022_full_report.pdf
20. Steffan W et al. 2015, 'Planetary boundaries: guiding human development on a changing planet,' *Science*, 347(6223), [doi: 10.1126/science.347\(6223\)](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.347(6223))

THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0NU

T [44] (0)1395 578222 **E** press.office@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk

W thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/end-brazils-donkey-skin-trade

The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969. The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588), both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU. Linked charities: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).