

# UNWANTED: THE DISPOSABLE HORSE

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Jane Duckworth August 2010

We live in a materialistic society with a culture of disposability. Many of us seem to be caught in an endless cycle of consumption; tiring quickly of our clothes, cars, electrical goods, and even our companion animals. Then this 'property' is tossed aside and we replace them. Throughout our history horses that have been no longer required have been sold or discarded, but it is only in the last few years that this section of the horse population has been termed 'unwanted'.

Australia is a country with a high horse population. The nation has roughly 1,000,000 domesticated horses (Australian Horse Industry Council figures), along with an estimated 300,000 – 400,000 brumbies (Australian Government's Department of Agriculture 2009 data) living on a continent populated by over 22 million humans. That's an enormous number of horses, but not as many as in 1918 when an equine population explosion saw a peak of 2.5 million, most of them working animals, as counted by the census.

The majority of horses no longer labour on farms or pull vehicles due to the coming of motorisation, but the interest in them as recreational animals has increased manyfold and the racing industry is huge. Currently Australia has a multi-billion dollar horse industry but there are many rejects – surplus to requirements - both healthy and otherwise. There are more horses than can usefully be engaged in the horse industry.

When horses are unwanted by their owners they are sold, given away or destroyed. Many horses end up being killed at slaughterhouses, either an abattoir or knackery. The horse processed for meat represents the lowest economic level of the Australian horse population and epitomises the unwanted horse.

The oversupply of horses is reflected in the figures of horses killed each year for food. Between 30,000 and 40,000 horses are slaughtered and processed for (overseas) human and (domestic) pet consumption annually.

Around 20% of these unwanted horses come from feral stock, being wild brumbies. The rest are domestic stock. The horses are slaughtered and their meat processed in two onshore export-accredited abattoirs located in South Australia and Queensland. When addressing the unwanted horse problem, the issue of processing horses for human consumption and its welfare implications must be considered. This issue will be considered in the next edition of *Horses and People*.

In the USA the term 'unwanted horse' was first coined by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) at a horse industry meeting in Washington D.C. in 2005. Unwanted horses were defined as 'those no longer wanted by their current owner because they are old; injured; sick; unmanageable; fail to meet their owner's expectations; or the owner can no longer afford to keep them'.<sup>1</sup> This definition pretty much fits the bill for Australia's surplus horses.

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of Equine Practitioners Hosted Unwanted Horse Summit (2005). The American Horse Council Annual Meeting, Washington D.C.

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Generally, these unwanted horses are geriatric, incurably lame, have behaviour problems, or are dangerous. They also include wild brumbies and horses that fail to meet their owner's expectations

because they are unmarketable, unattractive, not athletic, unmanageable, or cost too much to maintain. Many were deliberately bred and just did not work out as expected. Normal healthy horses of varying ages and breeds also become unwanted.

The RSPCA, some horse industry groups and certain interested individuals have considered what type of horse is primarily represented and who is responsible for creating the significant number of unwanted horses in Australia. There is a need for much more research into these questions.

Horses associated with the racing industry, both Thoroughbred and Standardbred, represent the largest single category of the domestic horse population, and anecdotally it is observed that many of these horses become unwanted. Possibly the first Australian study to broach this issue, (Hayek 2005) determined that large wastage (the clinical term used in racing for the discarding of horses bred with a racing career in mind) rates were indeed an immense problem in racing. This breakthrough study confirmed the importance of investigating the fate of horses leaving the industry, both from a welfare and public perception angle. The destinations of horses leaving were identified and a significant relationship was observed between the racehorse and horsemeat industries.

It's not only racehorses that are discarded. A huge number of recreational and competition horses fall victim to a common pattern – one you hear about regularly. Someone buys a horse for pleasure or competition and things start going wrong when an unexpected behavioural issue arises. These issues can result from aspects of traditional methods of training, which are often based on control and punishment, rather than true partnership. The issue gets worse and the owner doesn't know how to deal with a problematic horse. Sometimes they try to get some assistance with re-training, but usually it ends up with the horse being sold, either privately or through an auction.

In Australia there is now a movement towards using learning theory to eradicate or modify some of the traditional training techniques that can compromise the welfare of the horse. This involves classical training with a strong emphasis on scientific understanding of animal psychology and horse behaviour. This push is being led by Dr Andrew McLean of the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre and Dr Paul McGreevy of the University of Sydney. In a broad sense there is no doubt that there are questionable training practices that are being followed due to their traditional acceptance. Horse people tend to do things the way they have always been done. The ethics and sustainability of some training techniques are subject to continuing debate. As science gathers data through equitation science, a relatively new discipline, evidence will inform, not opinion.

The whole issue of unwanted/unsuitable horses is partly linked to the lack of education of owners. As well as the matter of how people endeavour to train their horses, the owners must be responsible in the first instance when purchasing a horse. Individuals need to be matched to a particular horse. Choosing the 'right' horse for the job is crucial so that people can have a horse that is trained to a level that suits their level of ability, their available riding time, and their financial situation and so on. Owning a horse involves long term responsible ownership that people often don't consider when buying, training or sometimes even selling a horse. What is the possible future for this horse that they are caring for?

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"They Shoot Horses Don't They?"

"Not every Dog has his Day"

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Having a test available to ascertain a horse's level of training, temperament and therefore suitability for a particular rider would be a great aide to matching him with the right human partner. The 'wrong' horse is generally discarded as being unsuitable. Dog shelters are struggling with the same

issue. Mismatched owners and animals result in surrendered, neglected and abandoned dogs as well as horses.

The horse industry will never be able to completely eliminate unwanted horses. Horses will always age, sustain career ending injuries, not perform up to owner expectations or not be attractive enough.

The horse industry needs to focus on the unwanted horse problem and develop strategies to both reduce the number of unwanted horses through responsible breeding; scientifically tested training, as well as through rescue and retirement facilities, retraining for other careers, and educate as to euthanasia options.

It is the responsibility of all horse owners to learn the facts about the unwanted horse issue and to own responsibly. They must be aware of how their actions affect the welfare of the horses they own and consider the consequences before they breed, buy, or discard a horse at sales or over the internet. The unwanted horse issue will never be completely resolved but all avenues must be considered to reduce their numbers.

Note: Doctors P McGreevy and A McLean have a new book, *Equitation Science*, to be available on 8 August 2010.