

The present and potential roles of donkeys in Granma Province, Cuba

by

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Summary

Although donkeys have been kept in Cuba for five hundred years, they have been under utilised, and have generally been used only to breed mules. In other Latin American countries, much more use is made of donkeys for riding, pack transport, pulling carts and even tillage. There is need to investigate and promote alternative uses of donkeys, particularly in the mountainous areas of Granma Province.

Introduction

Cuba is probably the Latin American country with the lowest use of donkeys as work animals. This is surprising, since Cuba has a largely agricultural economy, with sugar cane, tobacco and cattle being complemented by the production of rice, citrus and green vegetables. It is a country with mountainous regions that produce coffee, cocoa, fruits and root crops. For these, the principal medium of transport has been the mule and, less frequently, the horse. This has been the tradition maintained since the Spanish Conquest, through the period of American domination and on to the present day.

Degradation of ecosystems, depletion of natural resources and problems of food security confront humanity as a whole. Cuba has also faced the additional problem of forty years of economic blockade by the United States. This makes the efficient use of natural resources even more important. It is the contention of this paper that the donkey, which arrived in Cuba five hundred years ago, is a valuable energy resource that is presently under utilised. The role of the donkey in Cuba will be briefly reviewed from the time of the Spanish Conquest to the present day, with some consideration of the future prospects.

The past and present use of donkeys in Cuba

According to Beteta (2000), the first equids arrived in Cuba with the conquistador Diego Velázquez who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. He travelled with 24 horses, 10 mares as well as some donkeys and mules. In 1494, the Spanish king assigned 1800 *miravedis* for the purchase of 12 donkeys for America. From this date, almost all Spanish journeys of conquest and colonisation carried donkeys and mules. Some of the mules that arrived from Spain were used in the mines and in the interior of the island and further mules were produced locally from the imported mares and donkeys. The use of mules spread, and their social importance matched or exceeded that of horses. A consequence was that their use was controlled, and a license authorised by the Crown was required to use them for riding. Mules were always preferred for mountain work as well as for pulling coaches and carriages and as pack animals in all the regions of New Spain. The donkey was used almost exclusively as a stud for the production of mules.

The tradition of the mule as an animal for carrying loads, transport and traction was maintained in rural areas of Cuba; in urban areas they competed with horses that were used for pulling coaches and carriages. This continued under the time of Spanish influence (1493–1898) and during subsequent period of United States influence. Throughout all this period, oxen were the preferred animals for soil preparation. Oxen also powered the early sugar presses and rudimentary mills in the colonial period. They were also very important for transporting sugar cane.

Since 1959 and the Revolution, there have been many changes in the agricultural sector, with plans for profound changes. In the period 1960 to 1990, tractors increasingly complemented the principle traction animals (oxen). Mules continued to be used for mountain transport and donkeys were maintained mainly to breed mules.

As can be seen from Table 1, in 1960 the number of tractors was greater than the number of donkeys by a factor of 1.4 to 1. By 2000, there were 10 tractors per donkey and 1.3 tractors per mule. There was one tractor per 275 inhabitants of the country. This large tractor population was possible due to the good relations maintained with the socialist bloc countries linked by the Council of Mutual Economic Aid (Comecon or CAME).

Table 1. Numbers of tractors and work animals in Cuba, 1960-2000

| | | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |
|----------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Tractors | (000s) | 7 | 52 | 68 | 70 | 40 |
| Oxen | (000s) | 500 | 490 | 338 | 163 | 396 |
| Horses | (000s) | 800 | 741 | 811 | 235 | 303 |
| Donkeys | (000s) | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Mules | (000s) | 30 | 29 | 25 | 30 | 32 |

Source: MINAGRI, 2000 cited by Ríos and Cárdenas, 2003

With the disappearance of the socialist bloc, CAME ceased to exist, and Cuba was obliged to revitalise all its traditional forms of production and transport. Animal traction was a priority for this development effort. Horse and mule-drawn carriages and buses reappeared in several Cuban cities for the first time since the middle of the 20th century. Starkey (1999) stressed that motor power and animal power can be complementary, and this certainly was true throughout Cuba during the 1990s. It was planned to promote the use of mules in the mountain regions. Small herds of donkeys were needed to reproduce and produce studs, and herds of horse mares were also maintained to produce mules.

In Granma Province, the total number of donkeys is low, and they represent just 3% of the total equids in the province (Table 2). Nevertheless, the donkey population has been relatively constant. From 1960 to 1995, while the numbers of horses fell by 68%, the donkey population only contracted by 20%, whilst the number of mules remained stable.

Table 2. Equids in Granma Province in 2001

| | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|--------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Horses | 30 700 | 83 |
| Mules | 5 300 | 14 |
| Donkeys | 980 | 3 |
| Total | 36 980 | 100 |

Source: MINAGRI, 2000

Other uses of donkeys

For some years the Jorge Dimitrov Research Centre has been using donkeys to produce hyper-immune serum for the diagnosis of human disease. In one project, donkeys are used to determine cross reactions in anti-meningococcal sera. Donkeys are considered to have natural resistance and environmental adaptation that makes their immune system particularly appropriate for serum production (Fong et al, 2001; Sánchez et al, 2001).

Donkeys have proved to be fascinating for Cubans. There was one famous donkey in Mayabe in Holguín which was treated as a pet, and would even drink beer. People were also interested to watch the donkey in Bainoa which would walk unsupervised around a circular track and power a water pump.

Some people in Granma use donkeys for riding and for carrying water and goods. There is much potential to increase this. The *Empresa de Flora y Fauna* provides mules and donkeys to the State and private sectors with priority for the mountain regions. Pack mules can earn the drivers 30 pesos a day, and a train of six mules can earn 180 pesos per day of work. When there is much transport work, people can earn 4000 pesos per month with a mule train. Trains of donkeys could also be used, operated by women or men, providing more opportunities for employment, while assisting the community with transport operations.

Donkeys could also be used for certain tillage and land preparation operations. The work of Sotto, Wong and Armada (2003) on the use of equids for agricultural operations in Cuba suggests that this may be feasible. The State is making available land for small farmers engaged in livestock and crop production. In these circumstances, the donkey could be a valuable multipurpose animal to assist with farming and transport without the need for large investment in machinery.

Conclusions

Donkeys in Cuba have been under utilised. From the time of their arrival from Spain up to the present day, donkeys have been maintained mainly to act as studs for horses to produce mules for work in the mountains. In other countries, donkeys themselves perform a wide range of transport and agricultural operations. There is need to make better use of the donkey to serve communities both in the mountains areas and lowland areas. The potential to use donkeys for pack transport and other work should be studied, and diverse uses encouraged. The donkey could well be an animal of the future, particularly for community agriculture in the mountains.

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