

Mali's Garbage Donkeys

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Photo courtesy of SPANA

SPANA's Care Helps Lives and Livelihoods

By Margaret Evans

Landlocked in West Africa is the country of Mali, bordered by seven other African nations. This butterfly-shaped land is a culturally rich, ancestral crossroads of over two dozen ethnic peoples with unique languages, dialects, traditions, and beliefs expressed through their love of song, dance, art, and oral story-telling by the praise-singers known as griots, or bards.

The people are united through a Muslim faith, a local Bambara language (even though the official language is French) and a struggling agricultural lifestyle that occupies over 70 percent of the people.

Above: Many working donkeys in Mali live and work amongst the garbage heaps.

Right: Bone-thin working donkeys and horses are often their owners' only means of income.



Photo courtesy of SPANA

To the north, where the country falls within the ever-creeping Sahara desert, are the Arab-Berbers and the Tuareg. In the Sahel grassland-savannah region of central Mali and the woodland-savannah in the south are numerous black tribal communities, some of which have ancestry going back to the ancient empire of Ghana that once included modern-day Mali.

This is the land of the trans-Saharan trading routes, the camel caravans, the travellers, explorers, invaders, and the endless, historic trading of horses, livestock, rare birds, silver, ivory, jewellery, honey, tools, leather goods, embroidered cloth, and slaves. Salt, as a food preserver and dietary supplement, was so important it was used as currency and traded on par with gold.

Whoever controlled the trading routes controlled the land, a fact not lost on the ancient Mande people who launched a succession of Sahelian kingdoms. Great centres of wealth and learning grew in Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne where they had their own *madrasas*, or Islamic universities, and extensive libraries. But it all crumbled when merchants established sea-trade along the coast and the great caravans dwindled. The region was invaded by Morocco, became the French Sudan, and finally, in 1960, gained autonomy as the Republic of Mali.

But within its borders unrest simmered between the Tuareg separatists in the north who wanted their own nation-state and the blacks in the south. In 1990 civil war began.

"They did terrible things to each other," said Jeremy Hulme, chief executive of the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANA). "The north was losing. The United Nations (successfully) persuaded them to talk peace. SPANA offered that if you make peace we will make sure you get vet care for your animals. What we did was train eight 'barefoot' (local) paravets in Timbuktu and eight in Gao. We gave them each a camel, a cooler box and \$200 worth of medicines to care for livestock. Now, fifty of them are working all through north Mali."

SPANA, a U.K.-based charity that provides free veterinary care to working animals throughout North Africa, Syria, and Jordan, began working in Mali in 1995, the same year the civil war ended, and they headquartered in the capital city, Bamako.

"This is the fourth poorest nation in the world and struggling for last place," said Mr. Hulme candidly. "The average lifespan is about 40 years and 20 percent of the children die by age ten. We think there are about 600,000 working horses and donkeys in Mali and when we went into Bamako in 1995 there were about 1,000 donkeys working for co-operatives. It



SPANA came to Mali 12 years ago, and differences in the health and well-being of the country's working animals are now being seen.

was horrendous. Back then a donkey's working life expectancy was three months. They hauled rubbish to the dumps and there were 12 to 15 sites around the town.

"That's where we started. We had two mobile clinics going around the dumps. We put a lot of work and effort into this. We knew where the donkeys lived. We pitched in, treated the animals, [de]wormed them, and talked with the owners. In 2005, only one animal died. Now, the average life expectancy of a working animal is six years."

Garbage collection in Bamako involves heavily laden donkey carts making their way to collection points around the town and ending up at the dumps. The collection points are recycling centres where the poorest retrieve "useful" items for resale. The centres are also places for SPANA to treat injured donkeys, exchange harness, and provide advice.

"As everywhere, it's the town donks that suffer," said Mr. Hulme. "Their harness system is a little saddle over the back and a

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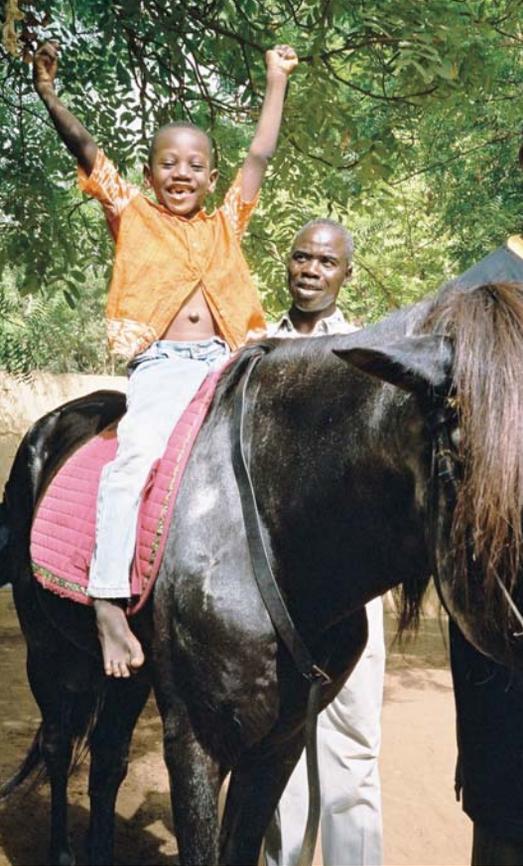


Photo courtesy of SPANA

A therapeutic riding facility operates in the poverty stricken region of Bamaka, giving help to disabled children.

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breast collar. We brought in a design for a bridge saddle. The pads sit on the muscle on either side of the spine. A group of women live at the dump and they are paid to make the padded saddles, cruppers, and breast plates. The donkeys receive farrier treatment and [de]wormers and we talk to the owners about nutrition. They are now buying millet meat and feeding their donkeys. They know it's cheaper to look after a donkey properly than buy another one."

In a country where poverty is so rampant and opportunity so limited, it's all the more amazing that in the middle of Bamako is a little facility that offers therapeutic riding. In a tiny yard in the grounds of the Hippodrome, an old, abandoned pony and a donkey are being used to give rides to disabled and handicapped children.

"The problem in Mali is that they practice genital mutilation," explained Mr. Hulme. "The women have no prenatal care and they have terrible problems giving birth, resulting in babies with huge physical and mental issues. But when these mothers have eight or nine other children to care for, these handicapped children are abandoned. There are hundreds of children in orphanages where they get fed but nothing else."

Twelve years after SPANA began work in Mali, results are starting to show.

Like many things, the program began almost by accident. "One of our doctors had a handicapped daughter," said Mr. Hulme. "He used to bring her to our centre. We put her on a donkey and she loved it. We also had this lovely, old bombproof horse. We had a couple of grooms to oversee the morning rides for about 25 children a week."

They exchanged an old Land Rover for a mini-bus so they could transport the children from the orphanages and they brought in school desks, crayons, and pencils to give the children stimulation.

Battling poverty and all the attendant miseries that come with it is still SPANA's most urgent work. The United Nations

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Development Group identifies three forms of poverty affecting Malians, including poverty of living conditions (access to water, housing, education, and health care), monetary poverty (lack of income and assets) and poverty of potential (lack of access to land, equipment, micro-credit, and employment). When caring for their own families is such a challenge, encouraging them to care for their animals is an uphill battle. As Mr. Hulme said, the horses look like death on four legs. There are hundreds of thousands of animals needing care and SPANA's mobile vet clinics can only reach one animal at a time.

Twelve years after SPANA began work in Mali, results are starting to show. At the end of a day's work, donkeys are rested, fed, and watered in small cooperative centres that can house up to 15 donkeys at a time. The food is marginal and basic but the donkeys thrive, not just because of the nutrition they are receiving but also because they are able to rest in the company of their own kind. The spin-off effects are becoming obvious to the Mali people. With healthy, sound working animals capable of putting in a hard day's work, families can make a living, put food on the table and send their children to school.

In the rural villages, donkeys are better cared for and the mobile vet clinics see between 6,000 and 7,000 donkeys a year. Local tribesmen have been trained to recognize and treat basic ailments in horses, donkeys, goats, and camels and they are equipped to treat straightforward medical conditions for neighbouring livestock owners. The project gives these tribal paravets a modest income.

The care of animals extends to cattle. "When the rains come they can get an outbreak of anthrax," said Mr. Hulme. "All their cattle were vaccinated last year and they didn't lose one cow. They know that looking after their animals makes sense."

Recently, SPANA began another innovative project by trying to reach people through Mali's popular mass media, radio. With a London-based script writer, they developed a drama series about a Malian family and their donkey "Big Ears." The series was so successful it prompted Ministry of Health officials to use the family in a new series of public health broadcasts.

In a country so rich in heritage yet so riddled with poverty, SPANA works to make life better for owner and donkey alike through its motto: people plus animals equals livelihoods.

If you would like to know more about the work of SPANA, visit their website: www.spana.org.

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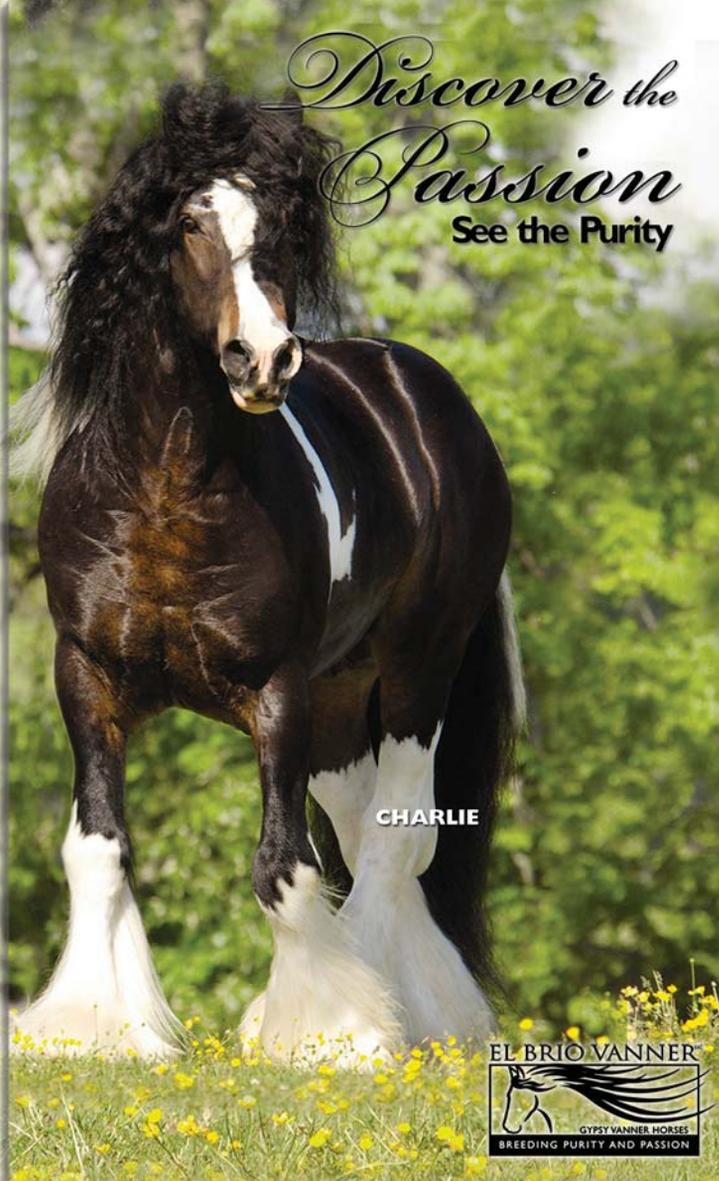
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