



Pack Mule Care

Leaders Checks

Endorsed by



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Important animal welfare considerations for pack mule supported expeditions. Expedition Leaders need to undertake these checks before the trek and be prepared to replace animals and/or demand medical treatment of animals. Involvement of the whole group in the survey will help heighten awareness and concern and improve welfare conditions and overall husbandry.

Observe the mule

1. Observe

What is your impression of the mule, does it appear alert/responsive or weak and depressed?

2. Condition of the mule

Can you see the ribs, backbone, and pelvic bones?

Use a scoring system here of 0-5 with explanation. (See appendix 1). A mule with a score below 2 before the expedition should not be selected. Similarly, a mule with a score above 4 is likely to be too obese to work in the mountains and should not be used.

Look for any signs of ill-health, including teeth problems that might be the cause of any problem.



Survey point: Check the communication between muleteer and mule, is the mule trusting and biddable? Does the owner use excessive force/exaggerated messaging to communicate with the mule? Note any signs of poor communication/negative enforcement, i.e. beating wounds on rump or injuries on or around the head.



Survey point: Mark down score for each mule and notes on any of the three areas mentioned.

3. Saddle Sores

Are there any saddle sores? The mule's back should be palpated from front to back to ensure that it is both pain free and free of any sores or swellings.

If there are sores, what is being done to deal with them, treat them? Is the saddle blanket protecting the areas? Is the muleteer treating and managing the situation.



Survey point: photograph each sore and where possible the cause (usually traceable to the saddle blanket/ harness. Note the treatment or how it is being managed.

4. Tethering wounds

Check for tethering wounds. If present treat, insist on use of the other leg.

5. Is the mouth free of any injuries?

Don't just check the teeth. Check inside the mouth. Is there any bleeding or blood in the saliva? Is the tongue hanging out?

6. Is the mule lame?

Check hooves, shoes and legs and assess if the mule is lame.

If the mule is obviously lame unloaded and at the walk, it is unlikely to be able to carry a heavy load over difficult terrain without struggling. Be aware lameness may not manifest itself until the animal is observed moving.

7. Life of mule

Explore the age of the mule, including how long the muleteer has owned it.



Survey point: Note the age of all mules. How long muleteer has owned mule and where it was sourced.

Mule's Equipment

8. Saddle Blanket

Take off the blanket and ensure all mules have their backs examined routinely prior to departure. Check its condition for signs of wear, weak spots, general condition. They should be changed every two years. Have they enough padding? The causes of any sores should be sought by carefully examining the saddle blanket.

Does the saddle blanket touch the withers or backbone? The mule's saddle blanket should sit clear of the backbone so that weight is born to either side of the midline.

Husbandry point: Make sure the blanket is taken off at night to air. Store off the ground. Check for dirt and twigs before putting back on. Brush down.

9. Bits

The bit should be well made and free from sharp edges and should not cause injury to the tongue, bars of the mouth or lips.



Survey point: Photograph the bit being used. Note its condition.

Husbandry point: Modern stainless steel bits and not the traditional, poorly made Berber bit are to be used and issued for use where possible.

10. Nose bags

If the muleteer uses a nosebag, is it well made and does it allow the mule to breathe correctly? It should not cover the eyes and should have ventilation holes to allow breathing. The strap passed behind the head should not be made of thin string as this is likely to be uncomfortable. Once feeding is completed, the nose bag should be removed to allow the mule to continue grazing/drinking.



Survey point: Assess and list what is used as nose bags for animal feeding.

11. Are the shoes secured?

Worn or loose shoes may be lost during the expedition leading to bruising of the foot and other problems. If unhappy, get the mule seen by a farrier, as there is usually one in each village.



Survey point: Assess type of shoe, how often changed, when last changed.

12. Head Collars

When leading a mule, head collars are always preferable as they leave the mule free of the bit.

Mule's Tethering

13. Type of tethering system

The tethering system should make use of a wide non-traumatic material that can be safely secured around a mule's lower leg without cutting the skin. Plastic or twine is unacceptable. Thin nylon rope should never be used against the skin.



Survey point: Photograph and note what is being used. Measure length and note what it is tethered to. Is the mule tethered in such a way that food is within reach and the animal's needs are not frustrated.

Husbandry point: Insist on the use of well made tethers made from leather or cotton. Women's Cooperative tethers should be distributed and used on all animals if possible.

Mule's Feeding

14. What are they being fed?

Mules should be fed on a regular supply of straw (one bucket) and barley (2 kg minimum). The addition of 250ml of sunflower/vegetable oil to the diet every night will provide additional calories.



Survey point: exactly what is each mule being fed daily? How much does it cost? What is it carried in? Where is it sourced?

Husbandry point: Check the barley. Sieving it will remove small stones and waste. Check its quality.

If the mule has a troublesome bit or mouth wounds it may have a problem digesting the food so it will not be taking in the nutrients. Be aware the animal may be getting adequate food supply but not digesting it and therefore losing condition and becoming thin. Undigested grain may then appear in the motions.

Mule's Water

The Expedition Leader must ensure the mules get regular supplies of fresh, clean drinking water. Check the containers. Check when the animals are watered and on a longer trek day a water stop is enforced for the mules.

Mule's Burden

13. Are there enough mules for the group?

Look at the loads not only for the trekkers but also for the cooks, tents and tables etc. Whilst a young, well-proportioned and fit mule may be able to carry more than 100kg (or a third of its body weight), such practices are unlikely to keep it fit and prolong its life so a reduced load is in the interests of the mule and the muleteer.

Ensure there are enough mules. Do not allow a mule to carry extra weight – get another mule! Do not accept the excuse that a particular mule is very strong and can take extra weight etc.

14. Maximum Load

Do not carry more than **80 kg per mule**. Use scales to weigh the loads- ensure sporadic spot checks at loading times are carried out to check weights. This is especially important if fresh provisions have been purchased or loads are redistributed within the group.

Mule First Aid Kit

Does the Head Guide/Muleteer have a first aid kit for the mules and the necessary training in emergency care? The ability to deal with common injuries and health problems falls within the guide's responsibilities. Wounds need to be cleaned and dressed to reduce the chances of infection. Sick and injured mules should be rested and arrangements made to transport them for veterinary attention where appropriate. A severely injured mule must never be left to die a long agonising death.

Mule Transportation

Mules sometimes are road transported from the start or finish of a trek. The Expedition Leader must check the conditions, safety and well being of the animals to ensure they can stand or sit properly, have adequate food and water, ventilation and that the vehicle drives taking into consideration how animals are loaded. Adequate padding and bedding inside the lorry for grip for the mule must be provided. If unhappy – do something about it!

Mule Rest



Survey point: Has the mule and mule owner had a rest day in the week? When was the last rest? Was this paid?

Failure to plan for regular rest periods can result in a mule working without any rest days during the whole trekking season. Ask if bivouacs have been planned to provide good grazing for the mule.

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A fully qualified Vet working for the Donkey Sanctuary has drawn up these guidelines.

Figure 4.6 - Body condition scoring system for horses

