

## **Equine health and grasslands**

### **Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group October 2006**

Have a look at enr 697 [to download from english nature website (not natural england...or at least i gave up with this one)] pp56 onwards for a bit on health benefits to equines from semi-natural grassland (mostly anecdotal i am afraid)

Jim Swanson

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The section on grassland management for equines in EN Report no 697 that Jim refers to is very useful. For anyone interested in how/why/if animals select different plant species for different purposes and according to their state of health, I would recommend a book by Cindy Engel called "Wild Health: how animals keep themselves well and what we can learn from them", published by Phoenix. This focuses mainly on wild animals, but provides hard evidence that animals appear to 'know what's good for them', suggesting that grazing animals presented with species-diverse vegetation to graze will select species according to their specific needs at the time. I point to this because almost all of the literature I have read up to now about diet selection in ruminants does not appear to go much beyond the results of behaviour studies carried out in improved/semi-improved agricultural grasslands.

With reference to report 697, as both Jim and the report itself say, the amount of scientific information available about conservation grazing with equines is rather small compared to that for other grazing animals and particularly compared to the volume of largely anecdotal material. As I have pointed out before, there is much scope for a review focussing specifically on equines and their use in conservation grazing, bringing together all information both scientific and anecdotal and including a workshop or conference. Such a review would need to cover differences in digestive physiology and metabolism between horses and ruminants and how this relates to differences both in the value to them of semi-natural vegetation types and in the effect they have on vegetation. For example, one aspect that I am uneasy about is the concept of a Livestock Unit (LU) and how this should be applied to equines (i.e. what fraction of a cow equivalent does a mature Exmoor pony represent in terms of its effect on the vegetation it is grazing) and to what extent is the general concept applicable across different species of grazer, specifically in the conservation grazing context. The LU concept was developed as a means of devising equivalent stocking rates as between (mainly) sheep and between different age classes within each livestock type, on the basis of the nutritional requirements and in an agricultural context, and is based largely on body size. Whether the effect on a particular type of vegetation of, say, 0.6 cow equivalents is the same if it is in the form of a number of fattening lambs, a steer, a couple of deer or a pony is almost certainly a very different matter. For this kind of information we seem to be heavily dependant upon anecdotal sources.

But this is looking at the subject through the other end of the telescope, i.e. from the vegetation's point of view rather than from that of the horse, so I apologise for the digression!

Francis

Dr F.W. Kirkham  
Ecological Research & Consultancy

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Would research on the use of "gates" which managed commoners rights help. These were the predecessors of LU's and each commoner had so many "gates" and thus so many animals of the common. Presumably over hundreds of years the problem Francis mentions must have arisen.

I understand that equines have less efficient digestive systems than ruminants. How come the zebra we shot for feeding the Turkana had fat on them when each morning I was shooting cattle that could no longer stand in a drought.  
In case you are worried we only shot common zebra and not the rare Grevy's type.

Richard M

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