

LETTER TO THE EDITOR **OPEN ACCESS**

The Miserable Lives of Abandoned Cart Horses

Takele Taye Desta 

Department of Biology, College of Science and Mathematics Education, Kotebe University of Education, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Correspondence: Takele Taye Desta (takele_taye@yahoo.com)**Received:** 13 August 2025 | **Revised:** 22 November 2025 | **Accepted:** 24 December 2025**Keywords:** abandoned cart horses | humane treatment | welfare

ABSTRACT

Despite their use in rural and urban transport systems, horses are often abandoned when they are aged and/or face health problems. Abandoned horses typically experience a miserable life, which is ethically unacceptable. This piece of work reports on the suffering of an abandoned cart horse and proposes strategies to improve the welfare of such horses. A type of pension program or provident fund and sanctuary should be established for working animals to lessen their suffering after abandonment. Comprehensive studies should be conducted to gather more data on the suffering of abandoned horses and to develop context-dependent solutions.

1 | Introduction

Horses, like companion equids, provide various socio-economic, historical and cultural services. They are highly integrated into the history of modern humans (Miraglia et al. 2006; Desta 2024). Thus, the humane management of horses is an essential feature of human ethics. Maintaining the welfare of working and companion equids is morally and ethically highly desirable. In Ethiopia, cart horses are widely used to transport people and goods (Asfaw and Tadesse 2020). Cart horse owners earn a decent income from the services their horses provide. The income generated is used to cover incidental expenses such as children's schooling, clothing, payment for medical and veterinary services, tax obligations, utility bills, food purchases, various other expenses and asset building (Asfaw and Tadesse 2020; Desta et al. 2022; Asteraye et al. 2024).

Regardless of services provided, cart horses suffer greatly when abandoned due to poor health, loss of condition, accidental injury or aging (Daneil and Asmare 2013). Abandoned cart horses live as strays and fly-grazers for the rest of their miserable lives. Consequently, they face significant suffering from diseases, scarcity of feed, predators, the irritation of biting flies, and blood-feeding birds such as red-billed oxpeckers (*Buphagus*

erythrorhynchus), as well as harsh weather due to a lack of shelter. After cart horses provide years of service, abandoning them when they encounter health problems is immoral and inhumane. Unfortunately, abandoned cart horses are more common in urban areas (De Klerk et al. 2020), where grazing land is scarce, which aggravates their suffering.

2 | Observational Findings

This report revolves around the history of a horse I inadvertently encountered when it was bloodied and suckled by a red-billed oxpecker on the outskirts of Addis Ababa (Image 1). This bleeding was caused by an oxpecker that has a fondness for animal blood (Plantan et al. 2013), making the wound severely injurious and introducing new infections. Similarly, about 17 years ago (around 2008), I observed a group of abandoned cart horses that were presumably deliberately moved to the centre of a swampy area in Hawassa city, southern Ethiopia, to dispossess them of their owners' property. In this scenario, sadly, they will be starved until their natural deaths occurred or were eaten alive by ruthless predators like hyenas. Since these horses are in poor condition, starving and stuck in the mud, they will surely not be able to move out of the swampy area.

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IMAGE 1 | An abandoned cart horse stands still by the roadside in Addis Ababa. On the left side, the front leg is heavily wounded, and an oxpecker pecks at it as I arrive there. The photograph on the right side shows another horse with a similar condition.

3 | Discussion

Humane treatment of abandoned horses, along with other animals facing similar problems, such as providing open spaces, communal grazing areas, supplementary feeding, veterinary care, and shelter, may alleviate the significant suffering they experience (Johns 2014; Derbib et al. 2024). For example, as is done for humans, there should be a pension or provident fund for retired working animals. Cart horse owners should contribute to these types of animal welfare funds. I suggest contributing 10% of the monthly income generated from working animals to a pension or provident fund that can be used to support their lives when these animals are retired. Moreover, philanthropists, donors and the government should make additional contributions to ensure the rescue activity is operational. Ideally, sanctuaries should be established to rescue these kinds of animals. At the very least, an animal shelter should be constructed to accommodate

abandoned animals. Arranging a life insurance scheme and developing a safety-net program may help manage abandoned animals. However, this could become paradoxical for low-income countries like Ethiopia that struggle to feed themselves (Popkin 1994; Ameye et al. 2021). Nevertheless, efforts must be made to lessen the suffering of abandoned animals. Humanely killing might be better than experiencing lifelong suffering. We need to cultivate an enthusiastic society toward the equine world. Mass education and community leader training using mainstream and social media are essential for raising public awareness. Legal frameworks should be established to ensure the welfare of abandoned animals.

In conclusion, comprehensive research involving both formal surveys and onsite scoring of the welfare of abandoned cart horses should be conducted to produce a more detailed report and to show the broader picture of the unfortunate lives these animals are experiencing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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Takele Taye Desta

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