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Animals On the Borderline: The Horse Slaughter Controversy

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Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

Animals On the Borderline: The Horse Slaughter Controversy

Are horses pets, products, or both?

Posted Jan 26, 2012

This guest blog was written by Jenny Vermilya of the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado.

I often find myself straddling a border. In my current position in life, I am what you might call an "insider" and an "outsider." When I was young, the only career that I knew of in which you could work with animals was veterinary medicine. Therefore, I, like many children, had aspirations to become a vet. I stayed on this track for a long time. I participated in internships, worked in various clinics, and was in an animal health program at a university that bypassed a bachelor's degree and led straight to the DVM (doctorate of veterinary medicine). Two years into it and I discovered another field involving animals. A very different field. Within the discipline of sociology, a subfield focuses on the relationship between non-human animals and society. Particularly due to my experiences in the veterinary world, I was intrigued. I became much more interested in examining how we create the social definitions of animals, instead of helping to reproduce them. I began to see how veterinary medicine helps to reinforce these definitions and provides care for animals in accordance with these beliefs. Now working on my doctorate in sociology and doing my dissertation research on veterinary medical students, I find myself in this "insider/outsider" role.

The Horse Conundrum

It is not surprising that I am currently studying another border. Being able to see with more than one perspective in my research has led me to focus on the muddled or blurred topics. To me, they are the most interesting. That is why lately I have been looking at horses. I grew up with a horse, but would not identify as a "horse person." I was not particularly interested in them, until the vet students kept bringing them up in our conversations. I have interviewed many students over several years and most of them talk about horses. For them, horses are more than just beautiful animals. For them, horses are a conundrum. Horses are currently between the categories of large animals, used in production for food or other by-product, and small animals, used as companions and even family members. The students describe the transitional status of horses and that we do not know where to place them. Consequently, this affects the medicine surrounding them. Are they treated like cattle or like Fido? The answer is either.

Sociology is known for its study of the consequences of difference - for humans. The reason we study how collectives create definitions is that those definitions have real consequences for us. How we construct race has real consequences for different races. Similarly, how we construct animal species has real consequences for animals - not just humans. The vet students continuously bring up the issue of horse slaughter as one of those real consequences for horses. In 2006, Congress banned federal funding for inspections of U.S. horse slaughter, consequently "banning" horse slaughter totally. I began my research in 2009 and after hearing so much about the horse slaughter ban from vet students, wrote an article on this "border" position that horses occupy. For these students, the ban was approved because horses are now becoming more and more individualized companion animals. After writing an article on this concept of a "border species," a few months later the ban was lifted in 2011. Not surprising one bit. For a species who is in transition and presents as a puzzling case for veterinary students, this legislation is simply reflecting that complexity.

Why Do So Many Horse Lovers Support Equine Slaughterhouses?

The vet students I spoke with often debated this topic in their classes. One might assume that students involved in animal care, particularly those invested in studying equine medicine, would be against horse slaughter. However, overwhelmingly these students described their favor for it. Many noted how horse abuse and neglect increased after the ban. For them, this was a complex issue and the public was uninformed. Their reasoning behind the link between the end of horse slaughter and the rise in horse abuse and neglect is largely economic. While horses are becoming more individualized companion animals instead of production animals, they still exist in the production world on farms that require them to provide an income. This creates a complicated situation where horse owners, by necessity, are unable to maintain these animals without horse slaughter. When horses aged and were no longer viable workers on the farm, slaughter was a means to dispose of the body and provided additional income for the farm. Euthanization of horses is a greater cost than that of small animals due to their size and the equipment needed to bury the body. With the option of horse slaughter taken away, and the inability of horse owners to maintain their aging horses, horse abuse and neglect has followed. For these veterinary students, a cared for life ending in slaughter is a better scenario than a neglected life saved from the slaughterhouse. They consider themselves having a larger perspective on this particular issue of animal welfare. An equine student I spoke with said, "You have to look at the issue on a big scale. You can't just say 'Slaughter is bad, therefore no slaughter plants.' And have all these neglected horses."

In Between Cows and Cats

I mentioned that I am working with the concept of borders lately. So what does that have to do with horse slaughter? What do I mean when I say horses are presently a "border species?" Another vet student described it to me as, "When we talk about small animals, we talk about them in a cute way. When we talk about large animals, we don't talk about them in the same sense. Horses are on the fence. You kind of talk about them in the context that you think about them." Horses have moved away from the large animal status and have become more identified with small animals. In other words, they are viewed less as a tool and more as a friend.

However, they are not fully transitioned yet. They exist in a border zone, where they are assigned qualities of both. In some contexts, they are an investment (such as in racing or farm labor). In some contexts, they are a companion (such as in pet keeping). In some contexts, they are both (such as in showing). We do not have a clear definition of horses, because their definition is changing. I said earlier that it was no surprise that horse slaughter was banned years ago. When we start viewing animals as individual creatures who possess qualities of companions, we find it difficult to eat them - or allow others to. Equally, it is no surprise that the ban did not last, and recently was overturned. Horses are still in contexts where they are production animals. If that value runs out, they are expendable. In order to deal with the increasing population of unwanted horses, slaughter became necessary again. Throughout my research, I have found what one student succinctly explained: that horses are "in between companion animal, in between cows to slaughter." Quite the border to find oneself. If we are interested in changing some of the real consequences for humans and animals alike, we need to examine how we create social definitions, how they are reproduced, and how they are ever shifting.