

# Animal Welfare on the Bicentennial National Trail

Contributed by Col Roberts

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If you have decided to use an animal to assist you with your adventure on the National Trail, it is a primary consideration that you are, or become aware of, your animal's needs, limitations and welfare.

It should not be expected that you can buy an animal, even one with trekking experience, one day and set out on the Trail the next. Whilst the animal may be experienced at its job you must also become experienced with understanding and caring for your animal and ensuring that the harness and equipment is properly fitted. You will quickly learn how much work the animal is doing for you, and that you are in fact very dependent on its good health and condition.

It is no good setting out on your big journey to find that your pack saddle doesn't fit properly or that you should have done this or should have done that. In the interests of your animal's welfare it is best to have some trial walks or rides to sort out the equipment, the things you need, the fitness of your animal, and the dynamics of the herd if there is more than one animal.

There are a number of things you will need to address in your preparation for undertaking a significant section of the Trail with your animal.

- **Fitness And Condition.** If your animal is carrying a load or just yourself, it will need to be sufficiently fit or conditioned for the country you are trekking in. There are many steep sections on the National Trail, some sections go up and down for days on end. Animals, like humans, need fitness or conditioning for this sort of work. Unfit animals will tire and become sore and your progress will be impeded. The keen eyed trekker will keep a very close eye on the condition of their animals, and build their fitness and stamina before embarking on the Trail.
- **Feed And Nutrition.** Your animals, like you, need food and water, so you must plan to ensure they have sufficient for the work they are doing. Grass is commonly available along the route of the Trail, but you have to be prepared to provide the time for access to it. Most trekkers arrange supplementary feed at towns or meeting places and in some dry times your progress may be limited by the feed available for your animals. As a general rule you will not be able to carry with you sufficient hard feed for your animals unless there is a support vehicle. Also you must plan for rest days and breaks from trekking to stop animals losing too much condition. Your credibility as a trekker will be judged by the condition of your animals, and there are many who will notice an animal in poor health or condition.
- **Loads Or Pack Weights.** This is an area with many variables depending on the type and size of the animal, the type of load, the terrain and distance to be covered. There are some guidelines but essentially it is the responsibility of the handler to assess and monitor your animal's capacity. Obviously lighter is better for all concerned and your animal will travel quicker, will not tire as quickly, and will maintain condition longer if it is not too heavily loaded. A conditioned medium sized horse or donkeys should be able to carry up to 50kg deadweight daily on the National Trail. Some will be able to carry more, particularly for short distances, or if they are not doing it every day. Weights may need to be adjusted for lighter animals, or for unusual loads or terrain. All will be better off if you travel lighter rather than fully loaded. It is also good practice not to expect your animal to rest fully loaded. If you are

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stopping for a meal or for a break set the pack bags up so that you can lift them off easily, and give the animal relief.

- **Injuries And Soreness.** Your responsibility as a carer for your animal extends to its health and treating injuries and soreness. Daily inspections when grooming or washing is a good habit. Look for sore spots, swollen joints, cuts, and places where hair is being rubbed. Handlers should carry a basic animal first aid kit and should not set out without advice from a vet about how to treat your animal for a variety of ailments. Animals should be rested appropriately if they are injured. Veterinary advice should also extend to the circumstances in which your animal would need to be put down, and the most humane way to carry this out if remote from veterinary assistance.
- **Tethering And Containment.** A fenced area or an area fenced off with a portable electric fence is the most common form of containment. If using old paddocks fenced with wire the area should be thoroughly checked for wire an animal could get caught up in. Other acceptable means of containment include hobbles (provided the animal is trained to them in a confined area) and properly configured ground tethering and high line tethering.

Finally the difference between an enjoyable experience on the National Trail and one full of drama and incident might well be the extent to which have prepared your animals for the trip. Good preparation, keen observation and plenty of time will ensure your animals arrive in good condition, keen to take you on your next adventure.