

## Horses: Livestock or Companion Animals?

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Ethics and Jurisprudence Essay  
September 14, 2007

Traditionally, in the United States and many other places horses have been considered livestock animals. Many people will comment that it was not the pioneer or the cowboy that conquered the western United States, but rather the horse that was responsible for the advancement of western civilization across the prairies and the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Horses first reached the New World via the Spanish Conquistadors during the Golden Era of Spain. Horses were first imported to the Caribbean islands and then were later imported to the mainland until 1700 A.D. when the Spanish horse ranged from the Carolinas west to the Pacific Ocean (1). The horse continued to redefine many Native American cultures, as well as western society in North America over the following centuries.

Today in North America horses are still used for working occupations including ranch work, packing for the United States Forest Service, and tourism-related activities. However, the majority of the horse population in the U.S. is used primarily for pleasure purposes. As our society continues to evolve over time, the role of the horse in our society is also evolving. This has led many people to question where the horse fits into the future of our society? Should they continue to be classified as livestock animals? Should they be classified as a companion animal?

As with all decisions of this nature, there is a great potential to impact society surrounding the horse, let alone the fate of the horse itself. One must consider the legal implications of such a decision, which extend from guardianship of companion animals to horse slaughter. One must consider the moral and ethical side of such a decision, including the welfare of the horse itself. One must also include economic issues into the equation as one considers this issue. The horse industry is a multi-million dollar industry upon which many livelihoods depend.

If the horse were to be classified as a companion animal, then one would have to consider the impact that there would be in the many activities in which horses are involved including rodeo, racing, dressage, jumping, western riding, and driving to name a few. The majority of equine injuries, although not all, are related to the occupation of the individual horse. Scientific research on gastric ulceration in adult horses has indicated that one of the main risk factors is the exercise of a horse at a trot or faster gait (2). One might argue that participation in many of the equine sport activities is not in the best interest of the individual horse. It is not unreasonable to see that if this argument progressed further there may come a time when, similar to the current legal issue of guardianship in companion animals, it might become illegal to use horses for many of their current occupations because it was deemed not in the best interest of the horse to continue to participate in those activities. In turn, there would be ripple impacts on the livelihoods of those individuals who either directly or indirectly depend on these horse-related industries. One must also consider that this would cause a loss of the pleasure that

is gleaned by many people through the human-animal bond, which in horse related activities often centers around the horse-rider or horse-handler team.

However, the reverse side of the argument would look at the recent efforts to ban horse slaughter. Many veterinary organizations, including the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Equine Practitioners oppose the ban of horse slaughter. Assuming that the actual process of horse slaughter is carried out in a humane fashion, the issues that arise are whether allowing horses to continue to be slaughtered is in the best interests of all horses across the U.S. and whether the economic consequences are in the best interest of the citizens of the U.S. Although there is currently not a market for horse meat within the U.S., 68,000 horses are imported annually to Europe and Asia for human consumption and an additional 30,000 are shipped to Canada annually for the purpose of slaughter for human consumption (3). The economic consequences extend to the slaughter plants, the meat inspectors, the owners of the horses that would be destined for slaughter, as well as the individual job of the slaughter plant worker. If one focuses more closely on the impact on the owner of the horse, one must ask, what indeed will the owner do with their unwanted animal if it cannot go to slaughter?

The unwanted animal is the main concern of the veterinary organizations. The owner must either pay to maintain an animal that is not able to work or they must pay to euthanize the animal. Many owners can afford to euthanize their animals, but then one runs into the issue of what to do with all of the additional euthanized carcasses. For those owners which either cannot afford euthanasia or would not choose it, what will they do with their animals? If one studies the basic principles of economics, one sees that such a decision impacts those individuals that are on the margin of deciding one way or the other, rather than those individuals at the extremities of the spectrum. If this principle is applied to the issue of horse slaughter one may conclude that it is not the horse owners which have already chosen euthanasia or to maintain their horses that will be the effected population, but those who are undecided, either morally or financially, that will become the population most effected. The primary concern is that these owners on the economic margin may simply choose to abandon their animals. While the argument may be made that horse slaughter does not fit within the moral standards that are found acceptable by our society today in the U.S., the reciprocating argument is that the burden of the projected cost of \$124,000,000/yr (3) needed to care for these unwanted horses must also fall on our society.

After considering the potential impacts of changing the status of horses from livestock animals to companion animals, there may be a positive moral argument for the change in status, but due to the negative consequences that such a change would have on the economics of our society, on the individual horse owner, and on the welfare of the horse, there seems to be overwhelming evidence that such a change is not in the best interests of all affected parties at this point in time.

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