

Animal traction in Europe in the XXI century: challenges, threats and opportunities

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Abstract

The use of draft animals is manifold today. Animal traction power can be used in various fields such as forestry management, agriculture, which includes viticulture, urban management and tourism. Despite the many advantages, working with draft animals also presents many challenges. Especially as animal traction is still often seen as backward and unfashionable. It is also problematic that draft animal power does not fit into the current economic system, based on large-scale, fossil-fuel-powered machinery, and the dependency of the customers.

There is also a lack of professional manufacturers for the equipment needed for the use of draft animals, as well as instructors for the training of the animals.

FECTU (Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation) works on different levels and together with other organisations to meet the challenges and to show that animal traction is a future-oriented and promising way of working - for people and animals.

Kurzfassung

Der Einsatz von Zugtieren ist heute sehr vielfältig. Die Antriebskraft von Tieren kann in verschiedenen Bereichen eingesetzt werden, z. B. in der Forstwirtschaft, in der Landwirtschaft (einschließlich Weinbau), in der Stadtbewirtschaftung und im Tourismus. Trotz der vielen Vorteile ist die Arbeit mit Zugtieren auch mit vielen Herausforderungen verbunden. Zumal die tierische Zugkraft oft noch als rückständig und unmodern angesehen wird. Problematisch ist auch, dass die Arbeit mit Zugtieren nicht in das aktuelle Wirtschaftssystem passt, das auf großen, mit fossilen Brennstoffen betriebenen Maschinen und der Abhängigkeit der Kund:innen basiert.

Außerdem fehlt es an professionellen Hersteller:innen der für den Einsatz von Zugtieren erforderlichen Ausrüstung sowie an Ausbilder:innen für das Training der Tiere.

FECTU (Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation) arbeitet auf verschiedenen Ebenen und gemeinsam mit anderen Organisationen daran, den Herausforderungen zu begegnen und zu zeigen, dass die Anwendung von Zugtieren eine zukunftsorientierte und vielversprechende Arbeitsweise ist - für Mensch und Tier.

Résumé

L'utilisation des animaux de trait est aujourd'hui multiple. La traction animale peut être utilisée dans divers domaines tels que la gestion forestière, l'agriculture, y compris la viticulture, la gestion urbaine et le tourisme. Malgré ses nombreux avantages, le travail avec des animaux de trait présente également de nombreux défis. D'autant plus que la traction animale est encore souvent considérée comme arriérée et démodée. Il est également problématique que la traction animale ne s'intègre pas dans le système économique actuel, basé sur des machines à grande échelle, alimentées par des combustibles fossiles, et sur la dépendance des clients.

Il y a également un manque de fabricants professionnels pour le matériel nécessaire à l'utilisation des animaux de trait, ainsi que d'instructeurs pour le dressage des animaux.

La FECTU (Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation) travaille à différents niveaux et avec d'autres organisations pour relever les défis et montrer que la traction animale est une méthode de travail tournée vers l'avenir et prometteuse - pour les hommes et les animaux.

Resumen

Los usos de animales de tiro hoy en día son muy diversos dependiendo del campo en los que se aplique. La fuerza de tracción animal puede utilizarse tanto en el sector forestal, de agricultura, viticultura, como en el sector urbana y turístico. A pesar de las muchas ventajas, el trabajo con animales de tiro también presenta muchos retos. Uno de ellos es la concepción errónea de la relación entre tracción animal y retraso, no apto para el sistema económico actual. Además existe una escasez entre los profesionales fabricantes de los equipos necesarios para el uso de animales de tiro, así como instructores cualificados para el entrenamiento de los animales.

La FECTU (Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation) trabaja a diferentes niveles y junto con otras organizaciones para hacer frente a los retos y demostrar que la tracción animal es una forma de trabajo orientada al futuro y prometedora, tanto para las personas como para los animales.



FECTU Introduction

FECTU stands for Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation – in its original French name and was established in 2003 when seven organizations met for the first time in Luxembourg and created this umbrella organization. Today FECTU – 18 years later – represents the animal traction sector in Europe and has 23 active members from 15 European countries representing more than 35.000 individuals from the membership lists of member associations.

Animal traction in Europe

When we talk about animal traction in Europe, we need to talk about forestry management, agriculture which includes viticulture – the production of wine –, urban management, and tourism.

In terms of forestry, it's important to note that we all observe a growing concern about nature conservation, preservation of the soil, or low impact management methods, especially in protected areas and these concerns somehow boosted the use of animal traction in many different parts of Europe. Moreover, it's important to mention that the work done in the forest sector is not limited to traditional logging but also often relies on combined techniques and newly developed equipment.

An example is the use of animal traction to manage a riverbank – riverbanks are very delicate, fragile ecosystems, and bringing heavy machinery into such an environment can cause massive problems, so animal traction in this case is being used as a very interesting alternative. Another example of draft horses being used is to manage sand dunes. These are also very sensitive ecosystems, so once again bringing heavy machinery should not be an option, so animals are being used with excellent results.

Draft animals can pull objects directly, but often various implements – motorised or non-motorised – are hitched in between to carry out different activities. This includes agricultural work such as ploughing on fields or in vineyards, but also the transport of logs.

In the case of logging work, for example, it is possible to use a forecart and a series of logging arches to make it easier. The good thing about this technology is that the same animal can carry bigger logs without exerting a higher effort which is important from the animal welfare point of view. Furthermore, even smaller equids such as donkeys can use similar technology to be able to work in a proper way, in an efficient way without overloading the animals or disrespecting their dignity or physical limits, and this is something very important!

Another instance of the use of draft animals, usually working equids, is market gardening – small-scale agriculture and horticulture. Here a big challenge links with the fact that most of these small-scale farmers using animal traction also need to be the sellers of their own products, usually in local markets, based on a relationship of trust between them and the consumers.

Over the last years, we saw draft animal-themed books appearing, such as the interesting book written by Clémentine Bonnin, Pascal Sachot, and Philippe Rocher, back in 2019 – *L'Âne Maraîcher* (the use of donkeys for gardening) showing that there is an increased interest in the topic!

The use of draft animals in viticulture is another growing reality, and recent studies show that the use of animal traction has a very positive impact in terms of soil conservation, not compacting the soil and with much better results when compared with tractors. Additionally, the same studies also show that the plants started to produce earlier, so we have not only a better wine or/and grapes quality but also productions that start earlier.

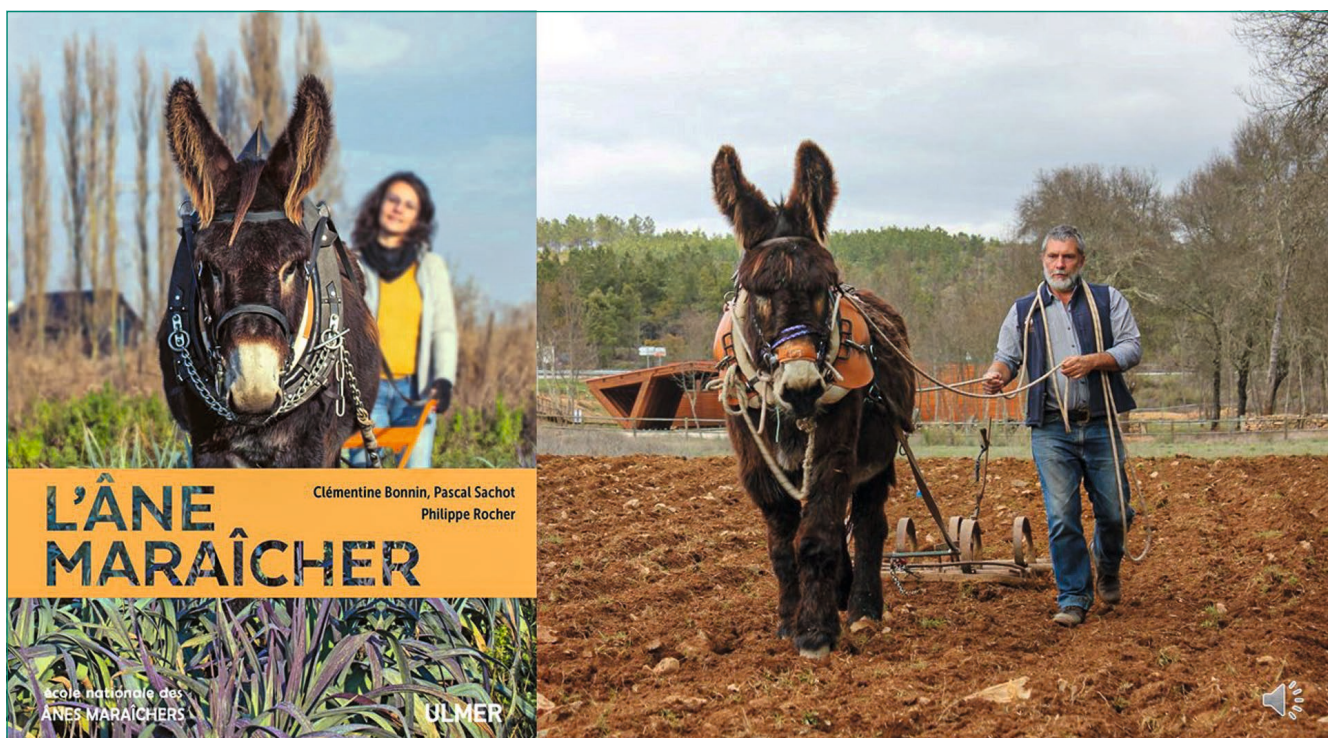


Figure 1 – Large European donkeys being used for small-scale agriculture: on the left, the cover of the book *L'Âne Maraîcher* shows a Poitou donkey, and on the right a Zamorano-Leonés donkey working with a spring harrow, during a training course in Portugal



Figure 2 – Poitou donkey working in a public park, in Trouville-sur-Mer, a city in French Normandie – France created a national network called Cheval Territorial, where more than 300 cities and towns who use draft animals for urban management came together

Moreover, the management of urban surroundings is also another interesting field for animal traction! We can see animals being used in collecting glass, litter, or paper. We can see animals being used in park management and in the transport of school children, too.

Draft animal power is also used in tourism. We know that there is a huge tradition in many different towns and cities of Europe that use animals to pull carriages, but what we've been generally observing is the use of animal traction mainly in sustainable tourism in mountain areas and this has actually been a potential asset to allow local people to remain in these low-density areas while having a decent job.

Challenges of animal traction in Europe

It is important to keep in mind that the overall perception of animal traction has very slowly changed over the last 30 years in Europe. Working with animals is still considered by many as something nostalgic, inefficient static, or even obsolete. In some respects, on the opposite side, people also consider draft animal power as a modern, eco-friendly, and sustainable option. Nevertheless, improving the profile of working with animals is still a big challenge nowadays!

Probably the biggest challenge that can easily become a threat is the fact that animal traction does not fit in the current economic system, based on large-scale, fossil-fuel-powered machinery, and the dependency of the customers. There is absolutely no doubt that animal energy is a renewable source of energy, but a drawback is that it currently cannot be transformed in a way that it could be stored, distributed, or sold out with the help of the existing technical system.

Another challenge for the draft animal users is the capacity to have access to professional manufacturers – both implements and harnesses – as manufacturers usually sell on a local scale, with limited distribution capacity, so it can be difficult to find a professional manufacturer if you are in a country in Europe where there are none.

Another difficulty is related to training, and for years it was hard for new users to find places where to receive proper training. Over the last 10 to 15 years, there was an increased offer in terms of training, mainly delivered by FECTU members, with some agricultural schools and institutions also providing training, mainly in collaboration with NGOs representing the animal traction sector.

Finding well-trained animals is also another difficulty. We need to keep in mind that training an animal is a complex and sometimes time-consuming process, especially for beginners, who need to rely on professionals to get trustful animals. Another important aspect to keep in mind is that the selection in the breeding process (in those breeds historically used to work) was mainly determined by meat production over a long time. Therefore, important characteristics such as conformation or the attitude towards the work were neglected.

The need to find a strategy to see animal traction included in national and international development strategies is another challenge. FECTU is working on this but has very limited funds and very limited human resources, so FECTU is always looking for partnerships and trying to find creative solutions. There are some good examples of the use of animal traction as part of national development strategies. You can see some really interesting documents published by the government of Luxembourg and Germany, in 2005 and 2009, focused on sustainable forest management. However, these are rather isolated initiatives, and a lot of work still has to be done to achieve



more usage of draft animal power on a European level. This challenge also takes another dimension if you look in detail: we have two different realities inside Europe and for which Romania is taken as an example of what is happening in the East: Romania is a country with probably the highest number of working equids in Europe, with official numbers pointing to 700.000 working horses, but local authorities are not supportive at all the use of working animals. This, of course, increases the challenges that must be faced while trying to adapt animal traction as part of national and international development strategies.

Another important aspect to mention is the increasing social movement with more radical positions, such as the ones assumed by animal rights activists asking to totally ban the use of working equids. Dialogue is not always easy or possible, despite the use of the arguments mentioned in this document regarding the benefits and the opportunities of the use of modern animal traction, and this is another challenge to keep in mind.

Equid Power Network

FECTU together with two UK charities, the Donkey Sanctuary and World Horse Welfare, started a project that is called "Equid Power Network" – www.equidpower.org. One of the main tasks of this Network is to create a comprehensive database that brings together all manufacturers from all over the world. Although this is a work in progress, the manufacturers' section of the webpage has a list with more than 130 manufacturers from more than 20 different countries. This is an excellent resource for professional draft animal users, but also new people who want to look at what is available on the market, and a good example where a challenge became an opportunity and not a threat!

Opportunities

The upcoming scientific interest that we observed over the years is, of course, an incredible opportunity for animal traction. You can see technically skilled individuals, draft animal associations, welfare charities as well as technical institutions or agricultural departments of universities showing a (re)new(ed) interest in research on issues linked to the use of working equids.

Apart from the scientific interest and the creation of partnerships, FECTU sees cooperation as an excellent opportunity for reaching our common goals. FECTU recently also joined the "Working Animal Alliance, which is a very interesting project (www.workinganimalsalliance.org). The idea of this Alliance is no more than a strategic coalition of stakeholders seeking to raise awareness of the contribution working animals make towards achieving the United Nations sustainable development goals, which is an excellent opportunity to bring working equids into the international agenda and show their importance to reach what the United Nations assume to be the most important goals until 2030 – the UN sustainable development goals. It is an excellent opportunity for us all together to promote and to show the importance of working equids, not only in Europe but worldwide!

Prospect

Looking into the future – still, in the 21st century – we believe there is a growing general awareness for energy issues, renewables, and ecological alternatives, but traditional options are also getting more attention, and this is a social context that in some respects is favorable to enhance the reputation of animal traction. And on the other page, we can also see small farming being recognized! Once it was part of the problem and today it is being

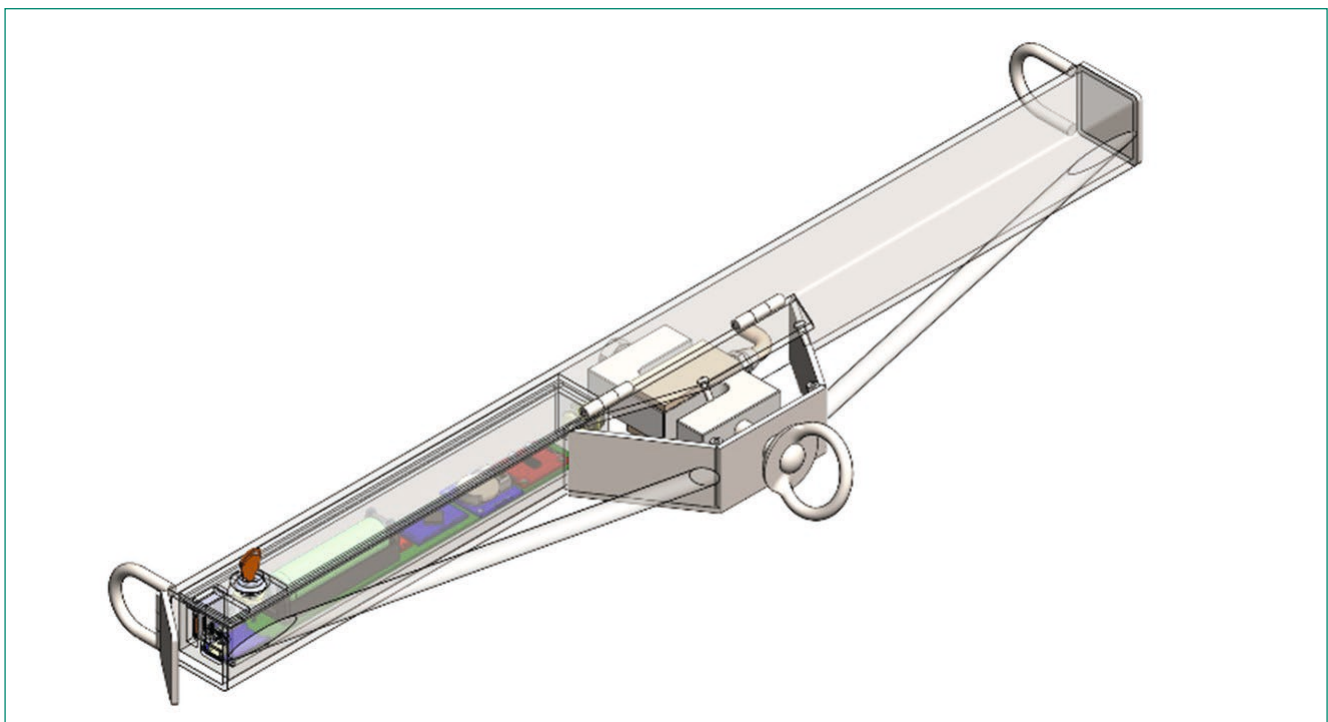


Figure 3 – Swingle tree developed by researchers of The Donkey Sanctuary and the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, as part of a research project to measure the force exerted by the animals during work. The load cell and the data logger were embedded in the swingle tree, not interfering with the action of the animals and allowing data collection for 8 hours

recognized as a fundamental contribution to feeding the world – especially in combination with draft animal power that proves how viable animal traction is in market gardening, in the vineyards but also in the forest and in the urban surroundings. We believe that this development might bring a bright future for animal attraction in Europe!

List of Figures

Title (Conservation work in a protected forest using draft horses) – J. P. Marnoto.

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