An Investigation on Present Status of Horse Management Practices in Sri Lanka

HWNT Wanasinghe*, NSBM Atapattu and WWDA Gunawardena
Department of Animal Science, University of Ruhuna, Mapalana, Kamburupitiya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Horse management in Sri Lanka during the colonial era was rich enough to export horses. Horse industry has a significant potential to grow with the booming tourism industry of Sri Lanka. Hardly any study has been conducted on the horse management systems in Sri Lanka. Objectives of this study were to comprehend the general horse management practices in Sri Lanka, find out the key constrains and to suggest viable remedial measures to overcome those constrains. The whole country was considered for the study. Horse owners within the country were identified using snow ball technique and out of them, seven horse owners who have more than ten horses were selected for the study. Data which was collected through participant observation was analyzed, discussed and compared with the global standards using narrative analysis technique. The main purposes of horse keeping include ceremonial purposes and police mounting devisoin works, to teach riding, trail riding, breeding and racing Thirty nine percent, 26%, 10%, 8% and 7% of the total horse population studied (n=155) were Indian Thoroughbred breed, Marwari breed, Australian throughhbred, half bred and three quarter bred, respectively. The mean number of horse in the seven studied stables was 21.8. Six horse stables were made according to the American barn style while one stable had free range system. In general all stables had provided sufficient space for horses. Mean floor area provison for a horse was 113ft^2/animal. All racing stables and police stable provided more concentrate and lesser forage percentage in the diet than recommended. Except few, all other horse owners provide less frequent feeding with more than .2 kg of concentrates per portion. Most of the Sri Lankan horse owners fulfill the recommended minimum daily exercise duration for their horses. Colic, skin rashes were the main health problems. Diarrhae was found among foals. Poor veterinary service, lack of skilled labourers and non-availability of horse handling or riding equipment were identified as the foremost constrains. It is concluded that the present status of horse management practices in Sri Lanka is at a level that needs to be improved, with a special consideration on feeding strategies and the welfare of horses. More scientific studies are also required to sustain the horse management systems in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Horse management, was an industry in Sri Lanka during the colonial era and was rich enough to export horses. However, the current horse population under management in Sri Lanka is as low as around 250. Horses are owned by the people who are considered as the wealthy group of the society, because managing a horse is an expensive activity. There are enormous present and future potentials to develop the horse management systems in Sri Lanka, particularly with the booming of tourism industry. Misconceptions, lack of knowledge and minimal support have made many potential people fear in getting involved with the horse management. Hardly any study has been undertaken in the past to study the horse management systems in Sri Lanka. This situation is among the several other reasons, as to why horse management has lost the industrial standard, unsuccessful and an unprofitable. Objectives of this study were to comprehend the general horse management practices in Sri Lanka, find out the key constrains and to suggest viable remedial measures to overcome those constrains.

Methodology

Considering the whole country, areas with significant involvement in horse management, Gampaha, Colombo, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya were selected for the study. As no published lists about the horse owners, stables for the study were identified using the snow ball technique. Out of them, seven horse owners who have more than ten horses were selected purposively as representatives of the horse management systems of Sri Lanka. Primary data was collected through participant observation and using a semi structured type questionnaire involving stable owners, trainers, groomers, jockeys and laborers. Secondary Data was collected from news paper articles. Simple descriptive analytical methods were performed using MS EXCEL.

Results and discussion

Acording to the information collected from the horse owners and and the information available with Horse Owners Association in Sri Lanka, the total number of horses under management is around 250. The main purposes of horse keeping include ceremonial purposes and police mounting devisoin works (police mounting stable), to teach riding (three stables), trail riding (two farms), breeding (two stables) and racing (two stables). Thirty nine percent, 26%, 10%, 8% and 7% of the total horse population studied (n=155) were Indian Thoroughbred breed, Marwari breed, Australian throughhbred, half bred and three quarter bred, respectively. Also there were horses which have bred and born in Sri Lanka. Most of these horses could be categorized under Half breed and three-quarter breed.

Riding stables are located in Colombo and Kandy Districst while racing stables are located in Nuwara Eliya. Police mounted devison has three units in Colombo, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya and the breeding stable is locatd in Gampaha District. Having established in 1921, Police Mounted Deviosn Stable is the oldest horse enterprise. The mean number of horse in the seven studied stables is 21.8. However it is noted that stables having less than ten horses were not selected for the study.

Six horse stables are made according to the American barn style and the stable dimensions have taken from the recommendations of the British Horse Society (2010). One stable had free range system. In general, all stables had provided sufficient space for horses. Saw dust is the most popular bedding material. One stable uses rubber carpets and saw dust only for foaling boxes. Corrugated iron roofing sheets was the roofing material of all stables. However, police mounted diviosn uses ceiling fans to cool the stable during hot days. Mean floor area provison for a horse was $113ft^2$/animal.

All the stables suppled their horse with forage and concentrates. Popular forages were *B mutic and Panicum repence*. One stable had started to grow hybrid Napier and Lucern. Retired horses were fed with cattle feed. Kacker and Panwer (1996) showed that the proportion of concentrate in daily diet of a light working, moderate working, intense working and pregnant mere were 35, 60, 70 and 40% respectibely. All racing stables and police stable provided more concentrate and lesser forage percentage than recommended level (Table 1). Horse owners believe the higher energy diets improve the performance. However, colic condions arising from high energy diets was common among the horses of those stables. British Horse Society (2010) has recommended that, having a minimum 0.4 ha paddock area for a single horse is a requirement to facilitate grazing. However no separate paddock area is maintained by the horse owners in Sri Lanka.

Table 1. A comparison of the horse management practices and seven farms studied

Parameter/Activity	Stable						
	Police mounted division	Premadasa Riding School	Victoria Saddle Club	Udara Horse Riding	Maruthi Stable	Jayarathne Stable	James Stable
Level of activity	Light work	Moderage work	Moderate work	Moderate work	Intense work	Intense work	Pregnant mare
Forage %	42	37	34	20	16	16	29
Concentreate%	58	63	64	80	84	84	71
Freequency of feeding (per day)							
Forage	3	5	3	3	3	4	3
Concentreate	3	3	3	2	2	2	3
Amount of concentrate per portion (Kg)	2.6	1.3	1.3	3	4	4	2
Duration of daily exercise (Min)	60	30	60	40	70	70	35
Regular hygienic practices							
Grooming	Twice a day	Onece a day	Onece a day	Onece a day	Twice a day	Twice a day	Onece a day
Washing	Once a week	Once a week	Once in Two week	Five times a week	Once a month	Once a month	Once a week
Stable muck up	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	
Disseases/Disorders	Colic Skin rashes	Thrush Skin rash Diarrhae during monsoon	Thrush Skin rash Diarrhae during monsoon	Colic Skin rash	Colic Skin rash	Colic	
Foal management practices							
Commencement of feed		Month afer birth	Month afer birth	In 21 days	Month afer birth	Month afer birth	3 Month
Age of weaning (month)		5	5	9	4	6	3

It is very much important to provide a horse with more frequent feeding with less amount per portion in order to facilitate effective digestion and to control stereotypic behavior in horses (Nyhart, 2012). Except few, all other horse owners provide less frequent feeding for the easiness of keeping and feed the horses with above 2 kg of concentrates per portion. But according to Lawrence (1998), the amount of concentrate fed to a horse per portion should not exceed 2 kg, in order to prevent digestibility disturbances.

The horses are fed with additional feedstuffs during racing and riding. Riding horses are fed with corn and Bengal gram in addition to their normal concentrate diet, with a week of adaptation period prior to trail riding. During trail riding period, horses are given carrot and butterscotch.

It is generally recommended to carry out a body condition score and to determine the nutrtient requirement. However, no stable practice that method. In some cases, labourers do not follow the recommended feeding schedule.

Normally it is recommended to give a minimum 30 minutes daily free time duration for a single horse or if not the horse should be provided with a 15 minutes controlled exercise duration (Federation of Animal Science Societies, 2010). Many Sri Lankan horse owners fulfill the recommended minimum daily exercise duration for their horses.

When horses are used for trail riding, a horse is taken for a four hour riding session per day for six days. For every two day riding session a rest day is offered. For racing horses, intense exercise strat three moths before racing. During first two months, horse is subjected to a daily controlled exercise consists of trot, hack and canter. During last month fast canter is done daily, along with trot and hack.

Almost all stables maintained dry environment with good sanitation. Colic, skin rashes were the main health problems. Diarrhae was found among foals. Normally sick horses are attended by skilled labourers and veretinarians are consulted only if needed. For colic condiotns, horses are given a controlled walk. If not show betterment, a warm water massage in given to the abdomen. If that practice also does not work, soap water enema is done through rectum. In riding schools, pregnant meres are taken for teaching riding until three months to foaling.

It was observed that poor veterinary service, lack of skilled labourers, non availability of horse riding or handling equipment, lack of knowledge regarding the performance levels and feed digestibility of horses, non-availability enough land area to maintain separate paddocks and poor knowledge in forage management as the major constrains within the horse management systems in Sri Lanka.

Trail riding is becoming a popular component in the eco-tourism industry in Sri Lanka which attract foreigh and local tourists. Horses are used for trail riding in Sigiriya, Dambulla and Kandalama area during April to August and in coastal areas including Ambalangoda, Unawatuna, Hikaduwa, Bentota and Bentara throughout the year. Horse riding is a popular game in Nuwara Eliya. With booming tourist industry a huge potential exists to expand the horse industry in Sri Lanmka.

Conclusion

Most of the horse owners have adopted industrial standards in a way that suit with the local conditions. But still there should be a special consideration on the feeding strategies and the welfare maintenance of horses. In parallel to this, horse keepers should be cultured with appropriate practical knowledge on paddock preparation and maintenance, feeding frequencies and watering and regular record keeping.

If the identified constrains within the horse management systems in Sri Lanka can surmount through active cooperation of all the responsible parties, it will benefit the horse and the tourism industry as a complimentary or a supportive attraction that will ultimately accounts for the economic development of the country.

Therefore it is recommended to conduct more scientific research and to encourage the local community to commence horse management as an enterprise.

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