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Human-horse interaction: Where are behaviorists in 2008?

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This presentation will include commentary on work presented at this meeting as representative of the rapidly growing body of equine behavior science evidence relevant to human-horse interaction and the welfare of domestic, feral, and wild horses.

A substantial literature has accumulated detailing the behavior patterns of wild and feral equid populations, and to some extent the behavior of horses in various domestic environments. Professor Klingel's and Professor Houpt's work, begun nearly 40 years ago, continues to inspire colleagues around the world to qualitatively and quantitatively describe behavior of equids in a variety of environments. Several examples of the importance of this type of work to human-horse interaction and horse welfare are evident in throughout the meeting. It forms the basis for assessing the disturbance of behavior in wildlife management projects such as fertility manipulations (Hopkins; Ransom & Cade) or species reintroduction (Kaczensky et al). Study of the apparent variability in observations among the populations will lead to a better understanding of environmental and other factors, which will have fruitful application to welfare of horses both in domestic and natural environments. Unfortunately, this work always brings to mind what I perceive as a nagging threat to horse welfare and quality of human-horse interaction is misinformation concerning natural horse behavior. Natural horse behavior seems to be of great general interest, but unfortunately inaccuracies and misinterpretations are pervasive in popular „horse culture“ and continue to be a conspicuous influence on management and training of domestic horses. Unfortunately, this misinformation often makes its way and influences equine education, both lay and equine science/veterinary education. Comparative observational study of behavior of horses in all settings by trained behaviorists, along with research designed to address purported implications for management of domestic horses, along with initiatives to transfer knowledge to educators at all levels should be encouraged.

Included in this meeting is considerable work addressing questions of domestic management practices such as forced weaning, transportation, stabling, and arbitrary grouping and regrouping of horses. This adds to a growing body of applied physiology and behavior research that has established trained behaviorists as a critical resource on teams making decisions on humane management.

Also well represented in work presented at this meeting is the exploration of cognition, perception, and temperament in horses. It is personally pleasing to see examples of direct investigation of the ability of the horse to respond to subtle human posture and gesture, which for many of us has represented just annoying possible confounders of earlier cognition studies. Behaviorists trained in perception and learning will no doubt contribute enormously to this exciting area of investigation.

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