

Social feeding decisions in horses (*Equus caballus*)

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Like many other herbivores equids feed on rather evenly distributed resources. Especially in ruminants several studies have proved the influence of social organisations, rank, sex and the depletion of feeding sites on the feeding behaviour of individuals. However, it is not yet understood whether social aspects affect horses' feeding decisions. Horses roam on vast habitats with constantly changing vegetation. In non-competitive situations domestic horses tend to return to the same feeding site until it is overgrazed. Whereas, for competition over limited food the social status of the individuals appears to be important. Curiosity about the influence of social rank and different social feeding conditions on the horses' feeding decisions between two buckets, equally filled with high-quality surplus food, led us to create the test situation described here. The observer horses were alternately tested with a dominant and a subordinate demonstrator placed in one of three different positions. We conclude that domestic horses use cognitive strategic decision making in order to decide where to feed in a social feeding situation. When possible they tend to return to the same, continuously supplied feeding site and switch to an "avoidance tendency" when another horse is already feeding from it or in the presence of a dominant horse. Thus the position and the social rank of conspecifics affect the feeding strategy of horses.

Key words: Feeding decision; Horse; Rank; Social behaviour

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