

Horse Properties

- A Management Guide -



Jane Myers & Stuart Myers - Equiculture Publishing

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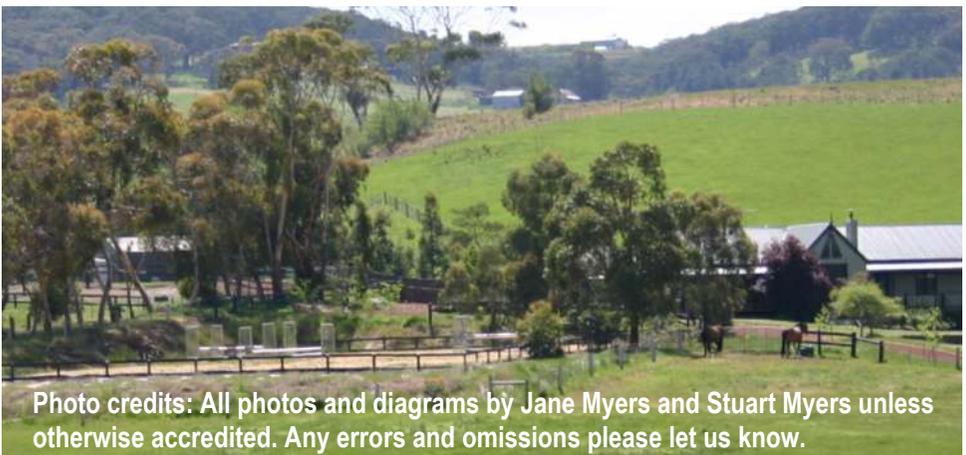


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Introduction

Healthy Land = Healthy Pasture = Healthy Horses.

There are *numerous* benefits to managing the land that horses live on as well as possible, these are just some of them:

- **Lower feed bills** due to more home grown feed (pasture) being available for a longer period of the year.
- **Less or no skin/hoof problems** due to there being less or no mud.
- **Less or no issues associated with dust** including dust related issues with people living nearby.
- **More provision for habitat for wildlife** such as insect eating birds etc. which leads to fewer pest insects such as irritating flies.
- **Cleaner and more abundant water.**
- **An increased land value/better public perception.**
- **Reduction in time spent on chores and a reduction in expense.**
- **Improved health and happiness** for the horses *and* people that live on the land.

Good land management is a win win for all!

This book is intended as a **guide** only and complements our **Healthy Land, Healthy Pasture, Healthy Horses** talk. For more in depth information on any of the subjects in *this* book see **The Equicentral System series** of books listed at the end.

Pasture grown for horses also protects the soil and helps to keep the waterways clean by filtering out nutrients.



Horse characteristics and behaviours

In order to manage the land that horses live on well it is essential to learn about certain normal/natural *and* abnormal/unnatural horse characteristics and behaviours. Naturally-living (wild/feral) horses have a very different 'lifestyle' to domestic horses.

The main differences between the lifestyle of naturally-living horses compared to domestic-living horses are:

- **Naturally-living horses** are highly social animals and therefore they live in herds/bands and have rich and varied social lives. **Domestic-living horses** are often prevented from interacting with other horses which can cause high levels of stress in an animal that would never live alone by choice.
- **Naturally-living horses** are able to make group *and* individual decisions about where they want to be throughout the day. **Domestic-living horses** usually have no control over where they are at any point in their lives.
- **Naturally-living horses** are on the alert for many hours a day, although this behaviour is shared with other members of the herd. **Domestic-living horses** are not usually in danger from predators etc. but they do not know this. They feel safer in a herd because they can then share 'looking out for danger' between herd members.
- **Naturally-living horses** eat a very high fibre/low sugar/low starch/low protein diet and graze or forage for many hours a day. **Domestic-living horses** often have a diet that is inappropriately high in energy and too low in fibrous roughage.

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- **Naturally-living horses** go through cycles of gaining and losing weight throughout the various seasons of the year. **Domestic-living horses** are usually 'micro managed' so that they maintain the same weight throughout the year, rather than losing a little over winter.
- **Naturally-living horses** travel large distances on a daily basis, from feed to water and back again in what is known as the '**home-range**' (a large area that contains the resources that they need i.e. food/water/shade/shelter). **Domestic living horses** often receive too little exercise and, instead of having to find their own food and water, it is given to them 'on a plate'.
- **Naturally-living horses** cope with a variety of climates and changing seasons ranging from very cold and wet, to very hot and dry and everything in between. **Domestic-living horses** rarely have to deal with temperature extremes. Modern rugs and stables result in many domestic horses never experiencing the need to use energy to keep warm.
- **Naturally-living horses** tend to have a shorter life span than domestic horses. **Domestic-living horses** generally live much longer. In fact, it is not uncommon for them to reach their thirties and forties.
- **Naturally-living horses** *usually* show very little aggression; particularly with regard to physical contact which could result in injury and *decrease* their chance of survival through predation or starvation. **Domestic-living horses** may be forced to defend themselves and/or their food. For example, we tend to initiate aggression when we feed concentrates to horses that are kept together.
- **Naturally-living horses** are able to control parasitic worms by avoiding eating near their own dung. **Domestic-living horses** may be forced to graze badly managed 'horse sick' pasture that contains high levels of parasitic worms.

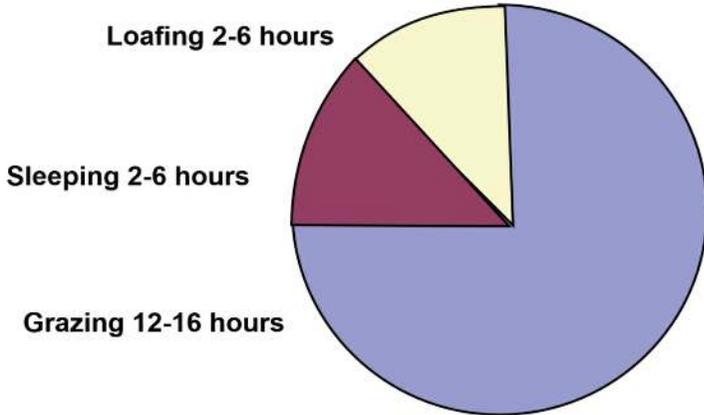
Naturally-living horses are highly social animals.



Daily 'time-budgets'

Many species of animal have been studied in their natural habitat to find about their daily 'time budget'. An understanding of how horses naturally use their time helps with their grazing management and therefore land management.

The time - budget of horses includes a lot of grazing.



Grazing

Horses have one of the **longest daily grazing periods** of all the plant eating herbivores. Horses graze in what are termed 'bouts' which typically last between 1.5 to 3 hours. Horses *usually* carry out their grazing bouts throughout the day and night with 'bouts' of sleeping and 'loafing' (being social) in between.

*Horses have one of the **longest daily grazing periods** of all the plant eating herbivores.*



The total daily grazing time of a horse depends on the **quality** of pasture available. On 'better' quality (higher calorie) pasture a horse will spend less total time grazing (approximately 12-14 hours a day) and more time sleeping and loafing. In harsher conditions (such as drought or a very cold/wet winter) when the pasture is 'poor' quality (lower in calories) and more fibrous, a horse will spend up to 20 hours a day grazing/browsing if necessary. In this case social behaviour becomes a low priority and they do little more than sleep, search for food and eat, in order to survive.

Sleeping

Adult horses sleep/snooze for about four hours a day, approximately two hours are spent lying down and two standing up. A horse must lay flat out in order to get enough rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. They can snooze, but not sleep deeply, while standing. This total time of about four hours is split into bouts of around 15 minutes at a time throughout the day and night. In very wet weather horses will often wait until the sun comes out to lay down rather than lay down in the rain.

A total of approximately two hours a day are spent lying down - flat out.



In a group of horses, one horse usually stays standing when the others are asleep on the ground.



Loafing

Loafing describes all the other things that horses do with their day, such as mutual grooming, playing and simply standing around together, being social. These behaviours are **very important** for a horse's well being and generally take up a total of about four hours a day.

'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'.



Standing around together is of top priority to horses, they will often **disregard other comforts** in order to be able to stand near other horses. This is seen when horses are kept separately in 'private paddocks' where they will **ignore** shade/shelter in order to stand next to each other on either side of the fence.

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The grazing behaviour of horses

Horses are herbivores; they eat plants and lots of them. This natural food source for horses is **low in calories** and takes a long time to collect, chew and digest.

Here are some interesting facts about horses and their grazing behaviour:

- Their physiology is different to that of many other grazing herbivores in that they are *not* ruminants (like cattle and sheep). Horses eat relatively *more* food but digest it *less* efficiently than most ruminants. Because of this fact, horses spend *more time* grazing than cattle and sheep and they *ferment* their food in the hind-gut while grazing. Ruminants spend a lot of their time ruminating (regurgitating and re-chewing their food) *as well* as grazing.
- Put another way, horses **eat more** but invest **less time** on each mouthful of food, ruminants **eat less** but invest **more time** on each mouthful of food.
- This strategy means that horses are generally more successful than ruminants in very **tough** conditions when the feed source becomes more fibrous or lower in nutritional quality. A horse's digestive system has evolved to allow them to survive in very harsh conditions.

Horses are very successful at surviving in tough conditions.



This is the end of the free section of *Horse Properties - A management guide*