

Caging horses

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Standard practice in the horse world dictates that horses be stabled, and provided with food, water and a place to rest. This minimalistic requirement for keeping horses in stables is a clear limiting factor for the horse's expression of normal behavioural repertoires which undoubtedly compromises well-being and welfare.

A stall, whether you are selling vegetables in a local market, or using the same for confining your horse, usually refers to a small compartment. Small compartments for confining animals are referred to as cages.

Even the best of stalls are just glorified animal compartments, barren environments where horses are incapable of, or not allowed to, interact naturally with conspecifics or carry out the daily activities they would engage in, in free living or even enriched conditions.

This may be quite hard to digest for the majority of "naked apes", as our life history is quite different to theirs. With best intentions in mind, we confine them from extreme weather, keep them away from other horses that could potentially injure them, and lock them up for their own well-being, and of course our own peace of mind. We strive to feed them the best quality feed, usually the expensive stuff, based on counsel from professionals or even just because that is what has always been done.

Confinement in cages, stalls or even aquariums in most cases prevents animals from engaging in behaviours exhibited when living in free conditions and this in turn is well known to cause suffering and distress.

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Lately there has been a huge interest in improving the quality of life of captive and domestic animals which have led to the development of environmental enrichment, which in turn offer stimulation and opportunities to express species-specific behaviours.

An example from the father of Zoo Biology, Heini Hediger (1955), was an enrichment he provided in the Zurich Zoo to captive zebras. During one of his trips to Africa, he noticed that many termite mound tops had been polished or rubbed away. Zebras would come along and rub themselves on these mounds as part of their grooming activities. In the zebra enclosure back in the Zurich Zoo, a cement make-believe termite mound was placed and the zebra were reported to be so excited by this enrichment that they rushed to it with such enthusiasm as to topple them over. Once these makeshift mounds were reinforced, Hediger reported that the mound “has been in daily use ever since” (Hediger, 1955).

On another note, Ernst Inhelder, a Swiss zoologist, studied species kept in impoverished or barren enclosures. He noted that animals kept in these conditions carried out repetitive stereotyped meaningless activities, such as walking back and forth a short distance, literally treading on their own footsteps.

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Similar studies were carried out on laboratory animals and for example; rabbits were found to head sway, bite bars or walk in circles. (Morton et al., 1993). The same was true for birds (Morris, 1966), carnivores (Fox, 1986), rodents (Baenninger, 1967; Wiedenmayer, 1987; Würbel et al., 1998; Callard et al., 2000; Reinhardt and Reinhardt, 2001a) and primates (Erwin and Deni, 1979; Poole, 1988; Harris, 1989).

In an attempt to improve conditions through cage size, Galef and Durlach (1993) as well as Bayne and McCully (1989), found that cage size does not necessarily reduce stereotypy. This is to be expected as it is the impoverished environment that is likely to be causing the stereotypies and not only the size of the cage.

Open stalls, or mini paddocks have been recently provisioned in many riding centers, precisely in an attempt to enrich the life of their horses. These open compartments are still barren and lack enrichment, especially of the social kind. But they are better than a kick in the bum!

A stereotypy is a ritualistic and repetitive type of behavior that serves no apparent function. Here a quote from Katherine Houpt:

“For years, we’ve called behaviors like these stall or stable “vices.” The first part of the name is right—with the exception of fence-walking, a horse doesn’t do these things unless he’s in a stall. But the “vice” part *isn’t* correct, according to modern research, which indicates these actually aren’t bad habits per se, but simply the reactions of horses that aren’t getting what they need.” Katherine Houpt, from [Stable Vice or Stereotypie?](#)

Despite domestication, animals largely retain the basic behavioral repertoire of their wild counterparts. There is little evidence suggesting that the process of domestication has resulted in the loss of behaviors from the species specific repertoire (Price, 1999), or that basic motor patterns associated with the species repertoire have changed (Scott & Fuller, 1965; Hale, 1969; Miller, 1977).

“Domestic animals are sometimes provided with an environment that is physically similar to the habitat of their wild ancestors. Behavioral and physiological adaptations to such an environment will be readily achieved. Very often, however, the captive environment does not match the ancestral environment and adaptation is challenged.” (Price, 1999)

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It is no surprise that when these animals are taken out of their “boring”, isolated and rather barren confines most will react to novel stimuli with fearful or even aggressive behavior. It seems that horses “(...) show a compensatory increase in activity when released from their stalls (Haupt et al., 2001).

Social isolation is a disturbing experience for horses, and isolated subjects show behavioral and physiological stress reactions (Mal et al., 1991).

It is in the light of all exposed above that we must consider that horses confined or isolated in barren environments such as those of conventional battery stalls, or cages are insufficient in providing desirable behavioral well-being, as they cannot perform the majority of their species specific behavior, fleeing, engaging in normal social behavior, explore the environment, exercise or even graze or walk.

In the end, it is really up to you whether you decide to cage your horse or not.

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