
An Equine Ethologist in the Company of Horses: A Book Review

by

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It is not often that I stumble upon a book about horses which captures my interest and it is even less frequently that reading such a book resonates with me, while it is absolutely rare for me to feel a need to recommend it to as many humans possible. Yet it is just such a book that I have recently discovered, read and returned to in order to study, review and recommend it. No, it is not without its flaws – which mainly entail a discrepancy between some of the author’s studies and observations, on the one hand, and the conclusions that she draws, on the other – but then what book is without flaws? Yet it is a book that I firmly believe no horse lover can afford to ignore because of the huge contribution which it makes to our understanding of the nature of horses and how this may impact our interaction with them. So just what is this book, who has written it and why do I seek to recommend it far and wide?

THE WRITER

The equine ethologist, Lucy Rees, formerly of Wales, who has lived and worked in Spain for probably long enough to be considered Spanish and who is sufficiently travelled to be deemed international, has written a book called *Horses in Company* (all references are to the Crowood, Kindle Edition), which draws on her academic studies of equine ethology and her own field studies of horses in the wild in various countries across several continents, including her ongoing observations with a herd of feral pottok ponies with whom she shares a large rural reserve in Spain either on her own or accompanied by colleagues and the numerous students who flock to her for guidance in their own studies of wild horses.

With a background of appropriate education and practice as rich and varied as this, Lucy Rees is clearly in a position to write authoritatively on the subject of horses in the wild and their domestication. And she does, doing so in a style that is lucid, economical and drily witty at times but always with the utmost empathy for the horses and the humans who seek to understand and know them.

A QUESTIONABLE INTRODUCTION

The introduction to the book raises more questions than it answers, so it may be best to revisit it in-depth after reading the body. Starting with a review of behaviour and pioneering ethologists’ preoccupation with it, the author sketches the framework for her book by taking the reader through an overview of behaviourist learning theory, cognition, emotions, and academic and applied equine ethology punctuated with a cautionary description of the temptation of anthropomorphism.

This is followed by a highly informative, if rushed, survey of the evolution of horses (to the extent that it is known, as much of it is not) and their domestication, along with a brief

consideration of the effects of the latter. More pertinently, Rees notes that a study of the horse's evolution suggests two key aspects

What the present-day horse's evolution suggests is that the two great selection pressures that shaped the horse's body – eating grass and not getting eaten by predators – will have shaped their behaviour too. A reasonable hypothesis is that their ancient habit of living an intense social life will reflect both these evolutionary trends, in the lack of competition for basic resources and in their necessity for behavioural defence against predators. (p.28)

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF HORSES

What comes next is fascinating. Rees provides a fairly detailed description of the common features of the ways in which horses live in the wild informed by her readings of key ethological field studies. For anyone who wishes to understand the natural default of horses – that is to say, the way in which they would act and live with each other if we humans did not separate them and keep them in stables, yards, fields and the like – this is essential information. And she ends this section by revisiting the two “great selection pressures” of the horse's evolution mentioned above but redefining them as the following hypotheses:

- a) horses have an intense and complex social life in which
- b) competition for control over resources is non-existent or minimal;
- c) defence against predators is paramount and affects social relations. (p. 39)

Rees notes that these hypotheses have been “partially, but not wholly, confirmed by extant studies”. With regard to the first hypothesis, she is emphatic that horses are “compulsively” social and, in relation to the second, concludes that there is no competition for food within the bands in which horses live in the wild, although they do jostle each other while drinking and competition for food may occur between bands where resources are more limited, and competition is particularly evident amongst males seeking female company, although one might be hard put to defining mares as a “resource”. As far as the third hypothesis is concerned – defence against predators – the author insists that, “there are no studies at all”. This of course begs an important question and it is this. Why in the space of eleven pages does Rees move from viewing the “necessity for behavioural defence against predators” as one of two ways in which horses’ “intense social life” reflect the “two great selection pressures” that shaped their bodies, namely, “eating grass and not getting eaten by predators”, to postulating that “defence against predators is *paramount*” (emphasis added)? After all, in the conclusions drawn from her readings of the leading equine ethological studies, which she presents in those eleven pages, she does not provide any additional evidence to support such a pronounced shift, acknowledging instead that no studies have been conducted by other ethologists which substantiate this.

THE HERD: A SELF-ORGANISING GROUP

Perhaps the answer is to be found in the section which immediately follows, that in which Rees presents the findings of her own field studies. And again, this makes for fascinating reading, especially the observations that she notes in her frame-by-frame analysis of video footage of a large herd in flight from a predator. This analysis reveals, first of all, that horses in flight act in accordance with what she refers to as the “flight algorithm” (“cohere or move towards others, match direction and velocity with them (what I am calling synchrony), and do not collide” – p. 61). Secondly, it shows that “any horse can initiate a change” (which effectively dispels the myth of the “leader” in flight). And thirdly, it reveals that “a horse who initiates a change is one with particular motivation to do so” and that “unless he has a particular motivation to do otherwise, a horse will do what others are doing” (p. 64).

What this analysis also shows is that the social bands in which horses live within a herd, break down in flight and reform once the danger has passed and the herd comes to rest again. Put another way, horses in flight become a self-organising group before reverting to their normal closely-knit social bands and intensely sociable interaction once calm returns.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF HORSES

The bulk of the book (pp. 66-136) deals with the social life of horses in the wild when not in flight and again, the content is fascinating. The single most important, lasting impression that I have come away with, one that confirms my experience with our own mares and geldings, is that horses must be amongst the most highly sociable creatures on the planet, far more so than humans – at least in those situations where the “nuclear family” or dysfunctionality is the norm – when they are allowed to live in accordance with their nature as horses, as they do in the wild, although the cohesion and social commitment of the extended family which I have seen in some parts of human society, such as in southern Europe and Africa, does come close.

Based on the equine ethology studies with which she has familiarised herself and her own field research in various parts of the world, Rees comes to this conclusion about the natal and bachelor bands in which horses live in the wild:

Within bands there is no aggressive competition for maintenance resources. The great majority of social interactions are affiliative, weaving a network of bonds based on kinship and friendship. Aggression is rare and limited to specific proximal causes including incest avoidance, rejection of inappropriate courtship, life stages and use of teeth. (p. 119)

AGGRESSION IN HORSES

By way of example, two of Rees’ students conducted a detailed study of interaction between the members of two natal bands of horses over a period of a fortnight (p. 114). One of them was made up of one stallion, five mares and three foals, while the other consisted of two stallions (relatively rare but quite frequently noted), four mares, one foal and three young colts of one to two years of age. Of the total instances of interaction in both bands, 67% involved a stallion and 80% were affiliative (“friendly”), while only 20% were agonistic (“hostile”).

Even more telling is the breakdown of the agonistic behaviour. More than half of the incidents (52%) involved a mare rejecting a stallion’s sexual advances when she was not in season and a further 13% involved a mare responding to a bachelor or a colt in the same band. Only 3% featured two adults in the same band reacting to each other in circumstances other than as noted and in those cases only mares were involved. The remaining incidents comprised mares responding to foals (their own and others) and members of the band reacting to members of other species (p. 116).

NO LEADERS AND HIERARCHIES

What is extraordinary from the perspective of humans is that such peaceful, sociable conditions are achieved without set social leaders and hierarchies. As Rees notes, “Herds or bands stay together and move together through self-organization, without dominants or leaders” (p. 120). As such, there is no strict, permanent pecking order, although the members

of a band will defer to the stallion when he goes about his protective duties. The question of dominance is dealt with extensively and the following two observations stand out:

Many feral horse researchers (including me) do not see dominance hierarchies within bands (p. 130).

Submission is another tricky point. Without submission, dominance cannot exist. But horses have no submissive gestures. All ethologists agree on this point (p. 125).

Even the stallion cannot be sure that the members of his band will continue to follow him. As Lucy Rees notes, "Depending on the population, up to 30 per cent of mares choose to change bands in a year, and the stallion cannot stop them if they are bent on leaving." To this she adds, "He does not control them, but is their consort" (p. 32). The implication here is that to a significant extent mares choose the stallions that they wish to follow. Such voluntary followership is also evident in their interaction with each other. Unlike the members of a herd in flight, the movement of band is dictated by any of the mares who have earned the confidence and trust of their peers. Yet, rather than such a mare leading the band (including the stallion) in the direction of food, water or any other resource or form of protection, it is more a question of the others choosing to follow that mare in the circumstances prevailing at the time. Indeed, the members of a band may refrain from following a mare in a variety of circumstances (p. 75).

CHOICE AND FOLLOWERSHIP

Rees notes that, "Feral horse bands are self-organizing units of autonomous individuals, without leaders or directors" (p. 75). She affirms that band decisions are "democratic", although:

band structure does not correspond to a democracy with an elected, ruling government. It is self-organizing, more akin to some visions of anarchy in which each member's life is his own responsibility to live as he pleases but with the utmost respect for others' need (space) to do the same. (p. 76)

The author also identifies two influences which are responsible for such social organisation within a band of horses in the wild, one external and one internal:

Horses, then, are constantly aware of each other. Each horse's position, orientation and movement is determined by a balance of two major influences: first, the position, orientation and movement of others in the assembly and second, individual motivation, often prompted by internal needs. What emerges is a composite, coordinated dance in which no individuals direct others but all influence and are influenced by others in a continuous subtle interplay. (p. 74)

The implications of this and similar observations are enormous, if they may serve as a clue as to how humans and horses might improve their relationship with each other. Generally speaking, the nature of horses' interaction with others of their species is entirely voluntary, although this may be suspended temporarily in certain circumstances, such as their response to external threats. Horses *choose* to be with each other, they *choose* who they wish to be intimate with and they *choose* whom they are prepared to follow in specific circumstances. As such, choice and followership are far more appropriate qualities to help us understand horses than the all-pervasive human insistence on leadership with the human claiming the role of leader. Perhaps Lucy Rees' studies and observations should lead us to conclude that horses challenge us to become the kind of being whom they choose to be with and follow?

EFFECTS OF DOMESTICATION

Because Lucy Rees is not only an equine ethologist but has extensive experience in training domesticated horses in addition, she has also had ample opportunity to observe conditions in captivity as well as in the wild. As such, she is also well-placed to comment on the effects of captivity on horses when compared with their counterparts in the wild.

Perhaps the single most important observation that the author makes about horses in captivity is that they are far more aggressive than those living in the wild. She puts it this way:

Domestic horses live in a wide variety of situations and conditions, from extensive pasture to little, overcrowded patches; from isolation cells to family groups. One common factor is that aggression rates, though variable, are far higher than in feral or even free-living horses, even during grazing. (p. 132 and see also p. 136)

So what is responsible for these extraordinarily high levels of aggression? Rees notes that, “There is, however, a growing number of studies that link increased aggressiveness to living conditions, to stress and especially to social stress” (p. 134). Presumably, to the extent that aggressiveness largely has its roots in stress, the living conditions to which she refers also raise stress levels. As such, the answer which she suggests is stress. This she confirms two pages later: “Domestic horses experience stress, of different causes and degrees, that raises aggression rates” (p. 136).

Rees also cites a number of graphic examples of social stress, enough to conclude that it is also a source of distress, potentially major:

Horses, being social animals, seek company, an innate urge that nonetheless does not provide them with the knowledge of how to behave once they find it. In a natural life, a foal learns to distinguish between individuals, to communicate by recognizing and using signals, to respect others' individual space, to know how to invite another to play and make friends. He sees his father sexually aroused and mating, sees newborn foals, and death, too. All happens so gradually and smoothly that we do not realize what a wealth of learning social life requires and supplies. Domestic horses who have grown up without company are often social inadequates, creating havoc in the company they so yearn for; young mares are often terrified by a stallion's display, and some are scared of those weird, wobbly, unhorse-like foals they produce. They are ignorant, through no fault of their own. (p.15)

As such, it seems logical to conclude that, unless a human addresses the causes of such stress, their starting point with a horse in captivity even before any training commences is a traumatised horse. In such circumstances, can training help to reduce trauma or will it merely raise the horse's stress levels? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the type of training. The author notes numerous ways in which behaviourist control techniques destroy horses' cognitive capabilities, stating:

Horses are naturally inquisitive and exploratory. Most domestic horses, though, have little opportunity to investigate, explore, or reach their own conclusions and decisions, for they are too restricted and controlled. Like other animals, horses learn to learn; if they are brought up in dull, unvarying environments, repeating the same mindless exercises, they have little chance to learn and do not strike us as being bright. As the Italian ethologist Francisco de Giorgio insists, limiting our training to behaviourist control techniques annihilates their cognitive abilities and their satisfaction in using them. (pp. 14-15)

DOMINANCE, AUTHORITY AND AGGRESSION

Lucy Rees approaches this subject from a starting point which acknowledges a highly uncomfortable and inconvenient truth but one which needs to be recognised as such, and it is this. In spite of talk of love, partnership and similar self-comforting concepts entertained by humans seeking an alternative way of being with horses, the reality of keeping horses is premised on this:

We use them. Whether we want to face it or not, the human-horse relation is one of power. The very act of keeping horses, even when we prefer to think of it as caring for them, means depriving them of liberty and choice. We subject them. (p. 137)

This is a profound observation and one which has massive implications for the potential relationship between a horse and a human. Unfortunately, Rees fails to consider these implications, especially in relation to the causes of stress in domesticated horses.

What the author does do though, is efficiently dispense with the philosophical justification for dominance and aggression in conventional and “natural” approaches to equestrianism. She illustrates the confusion underlying the use of concepts such as dominance, authority and obedience, concluding that, in the sense that they are generally employed by equestrians, they are examples of human self-delusion and are utterly alien to horses (pp. 137-144).

JARRING CONCLUSIONS

While Lucy Rees’ observations of how horses live and interact with each other in the wild are profound, some of the conclusions which she draws are jarring in that they are difficult to reconcile with the observations on which they are based. Here are some of those jarring conclusions.

1. Setting boundaries

Consideration on the part of horses for others of their species appears to have made a significant impression on the author, for she observes how they set their own boundaries for themselves rather than for others when interacting with each other as adults. For instance, an “intruder adopts specific body attitudes that signify friendly intentions rather than mere careless intrusion” (p. 109). In addition, “Normally, when grazing or on the march, horses respect each other’s space, though when resting, respect for space may be relaxed (p. 110).

Nevertheless, Rees concludes that horses are intensely protective of their personal space, stating that, “Horses regard the space around them, a little more than a metre around their bodies, as their own, and resent the intrusion of another unless it be family or friend” (p. 108). Yet nowhere in the book is any evidence presented of it being the norm for adult members of the same band of horses to express such resentment or to set boundaries for others in their dealings with each other with the exception of mares rejecting stallions who mistakenly seek to court them when they are not in season. If any objections are expressed, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule (p. 73). To be fair though, the author does cite instances of mares correcting other mares’ foals when the latter encroach on the former’s personal space.

2. Friendship

Lucy Rees notes that mares in the wild do not form close friendships with other mares (p. 36 and p. 113), something which I have also noticed in mares in captivity. Of friendship bonds she notes that, “These are particularly strong and lasting between males” (p. 113). Yet she

also notes that stallions and mares are capable of forming very close relationships with each other which are not related to sexual attraction but which are so intense that they can interfere with a stallion's normal behaviour towards his mares in general (p. 101).

Yet, rather than treat such relationships between stallions and mares as a form of close friendship, Rees dismisses them as "love affairs" (p. 113). In addition, she concludes that, "The excessive bonding sometimes seen in domestic horses does not appear to be natural, but a pathological response to insecurity and anxiety (p. 114). While it is true that, as in the wild, close friendships between horses in captivity usually occur between males or between males and females rather than between mares, the question arises as to whether amicable bonds between domesticated horses are less intense than amongst their feral – Rees notes that ultimately all horses in the wild are feral in that they or former generations were once held in captivity and domesticated to some or other extent – counterparts.

After all, the only time we humans seem to become aware of such "excessive bonding" is when equine friends are parted either temporarily or permanently. Their grief is expressed so graphically that it is almost palpable. While this may also occur in the wild, for example, if a horse loses their friend to a predator or accident, Rees does not present any evidence of such an occurrence having been observed in the wild and documented. This in turn raises the question as to whether the grief of the surviving partner would be any less an expression of the "excessive bonding" which she claims is only visible in domestic horses.

3. Flight or defence algorithm

For the purpose of her analysis of the movement of horses in flight, Lucy Rees draws on an algorithm devised by a computer animator called Craig Reynolds, who sought to create a graphical representation of the self-organising behaviour of a flock of birds by assigning just three commands to each of a random collection of tiny triangles on a computer display, namely:

1. cohere or move towards others;
2. match direction and velocity with them;
3. do not collide.

Referring to it as a "flight algorithm" (p. 61) or "defence algorithm" (p. 146), the author uses it to explain how horses move as a self-organising herd while fleeing a predator and claims that it is also employed to explain how other animals move together as a self-organising collection of individual creatures. She notes that such coordinated mass movement "needs no fixed leaders or directors if all follow the same guidelines" (p. 61).

However, it is precisely in this respect that this theory fails, namely, that there is one guideline which is not common to all such situations and it refers to purpose. In Reynold's model the sole purpose of this self-organising model is to avoid a collision with any external object. This means that a little triangle will only move for the purposes of illustrating the principle of self-organising collections of individual parts and will only deviate from the rules governing their movement in order to avoid such a collision. Yet in the case of horses and other animals, their movement and deviation from the guidelines that are said to govern it may occur for any number of reasons.

It is one thing to adduce such guidelines from naturally occurring coordinated mass movements to produce an algorithm for a computer animation but quite another to take the latter's guiding rules and apply them to groups of live animals. The drawback of the latter

approach is that we may limit the complexity of what we observe to a mechanistic understanding which effectively eliminates all possible explanations of our observations which are not confined to the narrow mechanistic approach of such an algorithm, and so we dispense with so many other factors that may influence behaviour, such as cognition and emotions, or at best acknowledge that that approach may be “modified by individual necessities” (p. 135).

4. Predominantly sociable or prey animals?

It is also quite another thing to take the rules of an algorithm and extrapolate their application to horses in flight to include their everyday life and then conclude that the paradigm of flight governs that everyday life. Viewed from outside a fixed circle of ideas, Rees argues:

one sees a band of feral horses as a cohesive unit drifting from one activity to another in a synchronous flow that, at any moment, can be upgraded into a mass flight for survival. Until this happens, individuals are guided by the same factors that make flight possible: cohere, synchronize, respect others' space. These are modified by individual necessities as each animal completes its own role. (p. 135)

In itself, there is nothing ominous about arguing that the everyday life of a band of feral horses is “guided by the same factors that make flight possible”. However, the author does not stop there. Instead, she has developed a behavioural paradigm for horses which is premised on flight and the notion that a horse is first and foremost a prey animal: “Gradually I came to see that their whole social organization and relations reflect their adaptation to the ever-present possibility of predator attack” (p. 7). Indeed, she goes so far as to claim that:

The social lives of horses reflect their adaptation to their ecological niche as grazing prey animals. The factors of the flight algorithm describe their social system, that of self-organizing bands whose autonomous members have different roles or motivation according to age and sex. These factors are present in all their social activities. (p. 66)

Of course, this claim also begs some very fundamental questions, namely, these. If the “factors of the flight algorithm describe their social system” in that those factors are also “present in their social activities”, why is it not so that their social life dictates the manner in which they flee from predators? Put another way, is the lifestyle of horses as highly sociable creatures not as defining of their social lives as flight factors, if not more so? After all, do not horses have an “intense and complex social life” in the absence of “competition for control over resources” (p. 39), and do not horses spend far more time in such a situation than they do in flight”. And if this is the case, why on the basis of the author’s studies and observations would we not start from the premise that horses are first and foremost creatures whose very way of life – and not merely their survival – depends on deriving the wherewithal to live as part of highly sociable family units (bands) in the absence of competition for resources in relatively close proximity to others of their kind, and that their social structure serves as the basis for their ability to flee from predators? In a nutshell, are horses predominantly sociable or prey animals? Or is this a “chicken-and-egg” question and neither aspect predominates?

RATIONALE FOR THE BOOK

Although the rationale for this book is stated fairly early on in the introduction, it is only towards the end that it truly receives expression when Rees turns to consider the position of horses in captivity in the light of what studies of their counterparts in the wild reveal about their nature as a species and what humans can learn from this for the purposes of caring for and interacting with them. That rationale is this: “For the horseman, the study of feral horse

behaviour is the basis for understanding why domestic horses behave as they do and whether we are treating them appropriately” (p. 29).

It is in the final part of her book that Lucy Rees endeavours to apply the lessons which she has drawn from her ethological studies and observations of horses in the wild to their counterparts in captivity and their interaction with humans. Having shared those studies and observations with us throughout the bulk of the book, the author has given us the wherewithal to assess whether her recommended application of those lessons is actually commensurate with them. Unfortunately, a review of those lessons reveals that, while they may correspond with the author’s studies and observations of horses in the wild in some respects, they do not in relation to others, some of which are fairly important. Let us examine some instances of this, employing the same categories as part of which Rees presents the lessons of the wild for human interaction with horses in captivity, namely, cohesion, synchrony, motivation, collision avoidance, learning and maintenance.

COHESION

Here are Lucy Rees’ initial conclusions concerning cohesion in relation to the lifestyle of horses in the wild and human interaction with horses in captivity:

Firstly, cohesion. Horses live in groups for their own safety. They live and move together, following each other’s leads without resistance or resentment, because that way leads to survival. In the more or less unnatural world we surround them with, their safety in our hands forms the basis of a naturally attractive relationship for them, one that invites voluntary cooperation. (p. 147)

While safety is undoubtedly indispensable if horses are to live in the wild as they do, is it really the overriding factor in their daily interaction with each other and the business of living? Based on the author’s own studies and observations as recorded in her book, this is most definitely not the case. Quite simply, while safety may be indispensable, so too is the absence of sociability and conviviality. Safety is quite simply far from enough for horses not merely to survive but to live! Even, or particularly, in captivity we can see this vividly. Without sociability and conviviality they suffer acute stress which may be expressed in the form of aggression and that in turn may ultimately result in their demise directly or indirectly at the hands of humans who are not prepared to tolerate such a response to the stress which they create in those horses.

And we can also see this in horses’ interaction with humans. Although her primary focus is on the human making a horse feel safe in their company, it is as though Lucy Rees instinctively senses that safety is not enough for she suddenly moves on to wisely recommend the following to achieve cohesion between horse and human:

Before we can move on to inviting synchrony, then, our first consideration must be whether the horse wants to be with us. The best test is to give him the option in a space big enough for him to get away from us, without any bribes or pressure tactics but only our determination to learn what constitutes good and interesting company for a horse. (p. 148)

This statement is important not only because of its inherent wisdom but also because of what it implies in terms of safety, namely, that it is far from enough for a horse to feel safe in a human’s company. How many of us have entered a small field or enclosure containing a horse at some time or another without the latter even batting an eyelid? The horse felt so safe with us that they could not even care whether we were present or absent, yet there was absolutely

no cohesion. As Rees herself notes, what the horse requires in a human is not merely safety but the qualities that make us “good and interesting company”. Put another way, we need to become a human that a horse seeks to be with.

SYNCHRONY

Here is Lucy Rees’ definition of synchrony and how it may be utilised for the purposes of horse-human interaction:

Synchrony, moving as one, flowing together without coercion, is the highest aim of any kind of horsemanship, and its greatest pleasure. Horses are natural synchronizers, to the point that once they want to be with us they copy our steps on the ground and respond to the signals of intent in our bodies when we ride them. (p. 149)

Her definition of synchrony is so very apt: “moving as one, flowing together without coercion”, although one must question whether riding can actually occur without any form of coercion but, if it can, how often is that the case if not rarely?

So what would induce a horse to synchronise with a human? According to Lucy Rees, “What induces horses to follow and synchronize with others is confident, purposeful leadership” (p. 148). It is a seductive concept. Yet there is no evidence anywhere in her book to show, firstly, what “confident, purposeful leadership” entails amongst horses in the wild and, secondly, that horses are induced to follow and synchronise with others through such leadership. Indeed, according to Rees’ flight or defence algorithm, it is inherent in the nature of a self-organising collection of entities, which a herd or band is, that there can be no leadership capable of inducing any horse to follow another. With some exceptions, horses generally act of their own volition as part of such a self-organising collection of entities. Put another way, based on the author’s own thesis, equine synchrony is a product of voluntary action on the part of the horses involved. They seek to synchronise with each other as opposed to being led to do so. This of course begs the question as to whether a human who wishes to synchronise with a horse should not do the same.

Perhaps this is the reason why the author states that, while a certain amount of learning is involved on the part of horses:

learning to synchronize with us as they do with other horses comes far more naturally to them than learning how to react to pressure on a rope. The exercise also teaches us to move appropriately. If we want a horse to move, we must move; if we want a stop, we must stop. Once we know how to invite cohesion and synchrony, ropes become largely irrelevant. (pp. 148-149)

MOTIVATION

To Lucy Rees motivation in a horse can only really be “positive”. Quoting De la Guérinière and Nuno Oliveira with approval, she claims that none of the “great masters ... used pressure and force, advocating delicacy, kindness and empathy” (p. 150). Although one might legitimately question whether this could possibly be the case where the horse is exercised and ridden using metal and leather restraints coupled with spurs and whips, it is clear that the author seeks to be on the side of the horse when it comes to a human trying to motivate them. As she sees it:

Motivation can be innate, learned through reward training, or a mixture of the two. If we put a horse in a situation where he wants to do something and ask him to do it, he will. We are then in the happy position of being able to reward his response to our signals: that

is, we use innate motivation to facilitate the willing response, and learned reward motivation to create a firm, habitual S→R link. (pp. 150-151)

Here too, the concepts employed are possibly as seductive to a human as a carrot to a horse. Yet there would appear to be an element of confusion present. For instance, while it may be true that motivation can be innate – witness how members of the same band of wild horses interact with each other at play – the author offers no clues based on her studies and observations as to how a human may encourage and facilitate such innate motivation.

Then there is the question begged as to why a human should find themselves in “the happy position of being able to reward” a horse after the horse has willingly done something that they want to do. After all if a horse wants to do something and does it, is the reward not in the doing? And does this not in turn imply that no reward is required from the human.

Instead, Rees suggests that we should take the horse’s voluntary behaviour and make it involuntary by conditioning it. True, she is more in favour of positive rather than negative reinforcement to do so but accepts that negative reinforcement may also be used: “Positive reward, that word of praise and small caress, does motivate, so that when teaching a new response through the use of negative reinforcement we use rewards to reinforce the response and motivate the horse to enjoy trying again” (p. 151).

Nevertheless, positive reinforcement is a double-edged sword. While it is true that positive reinforcement is more horse-friendly than and does not pose as much an obstacle to a human developing a relationship with a horse as the negative variant, it is also far more effective than the latter. The upshot is that, if the training is done properly, the behaviour that it will produce when triggered will be conditioned. As such, it will be involuntary behaviour, which by its very nature defeats the purpose of innate motivation and it is precisely the latter which produces voluntary behaviour. In short, because it is through voluntary behaviour that the sensitive, sentient being that is the horse is able to express themselves, rendering such behaviour involuntary denies the horse the opportunity to do so, effectively reducing innate motivation to nothing more than the involuntary conditioned response to a trigger. In short, there is no longer any question of motivation because the latter is by its very nature voluntary.

COLLISION AVOIDANCE

This is what some humans refer to as “setting boundaries” or “protecting one’s personal space”. As Lucy Rees notes in her studies of horses in the wild, adult horses in feral bands respect other horses’ immediate surroundings of their own accord. This is because they have learned this from other horses while still foals. In captivity, however, horses are not given the opportunity to learn from their own species. Consequently, we humans need to teach them this. Essentially, this is the argument employed by Lucy Rees when she states:

Feral horses are taught collision avoidance by being shooed away angrily if they invade another’s space or behave anti-socially within it. Domestic horses without herd upbringing are socially ignorant, and ‘imprinting’ teaches foals not to respect our space. Over-petting and feeding titbits diminish respect for space. However, a horse learns readily if we use the same technique as the mares. Leaving the horse loose in a space big enough to get away, we stop him a couple of paces away with a plastic bag on a stick. Only when we give a clear signal of relaxation may he enter our space and if he bites us playfully, as isolated colts do, out he goes again. (p. 152)

In the interests of personal safety, such a dominance-based approach may indeed be necessary at times. Nevertheless, one may legitimately pose the question as to whether it is really required at most, if not all, times. After all, even in arbitrarily chosen domestic herds it is possible to come across horses that have such an authoritative (not to be confused with dominant) presence that other horses defer to them as they make their way amongst them but do so in the absence of any fear. It is the experience of various humans, myself included, that the development of such presence usually precludes the need for such an insistence on respect for personal boundaries which is as crude as a “plastic bag at the end of a stick” and at most a glance or minimal gesture coupled with the energy of intent will suffice. Indeed, we can witness the same amongst horses in captivity.

LEARNING

Lucy Rees starts the section on learning with an observation which is absolutely crucial for every would-be human trainer to understand and it is this:

Horses never stop learning from their experiences, even when we are unaware of it. Whether they learn what we want them to is a different matter. (p. 152)

The essential truth of this statement is that horses are the architects of their own learning. The implication is that horses learn whether a human is trying to teach them or not. Any would-be human trainer needs to approach training from this perspective. What this entails is unfortunately something which the author does not consider. Instead, she states the following:

Teaching involves knowing how to teach: studying learning theory, as other animal trainers do. Knowing how and when to reward; how to set up situations in which the horse will learn easily; how to use signals in a clear, consistent way; how to make learning interesting; how many repetitions are necessary to cement learning; when to stop; why horses learn something other than what is hoped for, and what to do about it – these factors mark the difference between good and bad teachers. (p. 152)

Here Rees actually situates training largely, if not entirely, within the context of behaviour modification through conditioning. This is a mechanistic approach to learning which ignores the horse’s capacity for cognition and spontaneous communication, powerful learning tools in their own right.

MAINTENANCE

The title of this section has me flummoxed because I cannot reconcile it with its content. Essentially, this brief section presents a juxtaposition of the inevitable suffering of horses in captivity – “Horses cannot be expected to live in wholly unnatural conditions without suffering” (p. 153) – and what we can learn about their needs by studying their counterparts in the wild:

Studying horses in natural conditions makes clearer what their fundamental necessities are: contact with others, communication, physical comfort maintained by free movement, rolling and stretching, and always something to nibble at, preferably green. (p. 154)

To this extent, it is a reaffirmation of the purpose of the book: to familiarise ourselves with the essential nature of the horse, so as to be able to care for and interact with the horse in a manner which is appropriate to their nature.

THE STUDIES: A MISSING COMPONENT

Although the section devoted to horse-human interaction raises as many questions as it answers, if not more, it is very brief, representing a mere 15 of the 161 pages that make up the body of the book. As such, it cannot detract from the validity and importance of Lucy Rees' studies and observations of horses in the wild.

Nevertheless, there seems to me to be a component that is glaringly absent from those studies and observations, if my observations – and those of others – of horses in captivity are anything to go by, and it is this: energy. Anecdotal observations and “academically appropriate” studies reveal that there are horses – stallions and mares – who are capable of such presence of being and quality of action in certain circumstances that others of their species defer to them. They appear to be informed by an element which, for want of a better term, I refer to as energy. By way of example of what I am alluding to, consider how a glance or slight adjustment of the ears may suffice in one horse alerting another as to what is inappropriate, while another horse may need to flatten their ears entirely, harden their eyes and muzzle, and even lunge to achieve the same effect. The difference seems to lie in the energy that accompanies the overt body language.

While it is entirely understandable that academic preoccupation with objectivity and empiricism demands a focus on statistics, there is a patent need for ethological studies of horses to include the quality of behaviour in addition to its form and frequency. In short, we also need to focus on the energy with which horses express themselves for reasons which Rees herself alludes to in the closing part of her book.

HORSE-HUMAN INTERACTION: A MISSING COMPONENT

The brief section dealing with interaction between horses and humans towards the end of the book also misses what experience has shown me to be one of the most vital components of any meaningful relationship between the species and that is the relationship itself. It seems to me to be self-evident that the relationship which a horse and a human develop with each other will inevitably define and channel the significance of everything that occurs between the species irrespective of whether the human wants this or not. This is because, as Lucy Rees shows in her analysis of other equine ethological studies and the presentation of her own field work, horses are highly sociable creatures and the relationship which they have with each other largely defines their way of life and how they respond to each other and alien species.

Even a relationship within which one is bent on pursuing interaction with a horse that is solely based on securing a mechanistic response from a horse to cues provided by a human – that is to say, an approach that essentially seeks to deny the existence of any relationship between the species – will define how the horse views and responds to the human. And little imagination is required to understand that a horse is likely to perceive and experience such actions on the part a human as agonistic where they are based on punishment or negative reinforcement, and affiliative if a positive reinforcement approach is pursued but only up to the point where it has no say in whether or not interspecies interaction should continue or not, because the horse is fettered or confined. Heartfelt expressions of love and talk of partnership are unlikely to change this essential reality for the horse no matter how sincere the human may be.

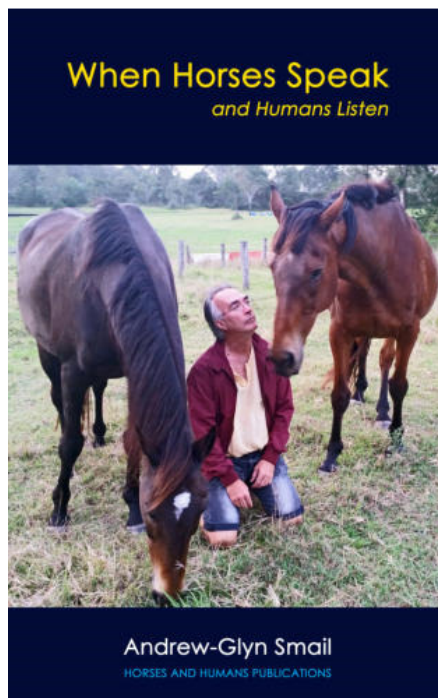
Ultimately, we are left with the question as to whether we can afford to ignore something as crucial as the horse-human relationship, as one will develop whether we want it to or not.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS BOOK

Notwithstanding its flaws, especially the inconsistency between Lucy Rees' studies and observations of horses in the wild and many of her conclusions in relation to interaction between their counterparts in captivity and humans, *Horses in Company* is a book that anyone who cares for and about horses simply cannot afford to ignore. Indeed, I would go so far as to insist that it is a book that such humans not only need to read but also study.

This is because the author's studies and observations of horses in the wild offer so many clues as to what is required of us, if we would really like to interact meaningfully with domesticated horses in harmony without the need for harsh restraints, instruments of coercion or even training. Once we discover how sociable and friendly horses really are in the company of others, learn what makes this possible and commit to replicating it in our dealings with them, the path towards our admission into the company of horses will become that much clearer and easier to traverse. In *Horses in Company*, Lucy Rees has written a book that has the potential to be a bright beacon illuminating this path for any horse lover seeking enlightenment.

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