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Back to Basics

The development of a descriptive reference ethogram for equitation science

Ask a veterinarian, a judge and a farrier to describe a particular horse and you might get three very different answers. Show them a set of behaviours and ask them to name and characterise them and you might well believe they were observing different horses altogether. This might be amusing as a party game, but when it comes to discussing behaviour at a scientific level or to comparing one behaviour study with another, it presents a unique set of problems.

Marc Pierard, from the University of Leuven, Belgium with his colleagues Prof. Paul McGreevy and Prof. Rony Geers set about getting back to basics and re-starting the discussion around the development of a descriptive reference ethogram for equitation science in a paper presented at ISES 2017 Down Under Conference in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia, this week. Whilst it is common practice for researchers to develop their own study ethograms for use in their individual pursuits, the ultimate goal of a species ethogram is to produce a comprehensive list of clearly defined and named behaviours and, ultimately, what they mean. Admitting that we have a long way to go to reach that lofty goal, a simpler descriptive ethogram for use in equitation science would allow us to compare apples with apples, if you will.

The availability and adoption of such an ethogram would increase the validity, repeatability and comparability of equitation science behaviour studies allowing for more efficient statistical analysis. Whilst it may sound very basic research, the work is only now being done. For this project, the researchers conducted a feasibility study using a panel of 13 equitation science researchers plus 10 high level practitioners. The panelists received basic training on the application of a reference ethogram and were asked to score a series of short video clips displaying a range of behaviours. The results showed a high level of agreement between academics and practitioners, indicating a high degree of accuracy and reliability.

According to these preliminary findings, agreement on descriptive definitions of behaviours is certainly possible. According to Marc Pierard, agreement on the description is the first step in the process: "We should not ignore the importance of description based research. We should avoid what Konrad Lorenz called 'the fashionable fallacy of dispensing with description'. We all should watch and observe our horses. There is great power in the practice of observation and in what we can learn from this simple act.

“The work of developing a descriptive reference ethogram may be an enormous task, yet we could never consider the work to be finished; it should allow for flexibility, it should invite constant and rigorous criticism and welcome attempts at improvement. Once the description and definition is commonly agreed upon we can move on to the business of explaining causes and functions, but first we need to get back to basics and build a solid foundation.”

ISES Down Under 2017 continues in Wagga Wagga this week with much food for thought being presented each day to over 170 delegates from all over the world. Whilst the temperatures soar outside, the heat of discussion is rising in the auditorium. We will be reporting on further presentations over the next few days so for those playing at home, watch this space and visit the ISES Facebook page for updates.

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The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. www.equitationsscience.com

For more information contact:

ISES Hon. President

Dr Camie Heleski

presidents@equitationsscience.com

Kate Fenner ISES Media Officer

media@equitationsscience.com

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