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Review

Keeping horses in groups: A review

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Abstract

Although husbandry conditions for horses have improved over the last decades, many horses are still kept singly with limited or no physical contact to other horses. This is surprising, given the fact that keeping horses in groups is recognised best to fulfil their physical and behavioural needs, especially their need for social contact with conspecifics, as well as to have a beneficial effect on horse–human interactions during training.

Group housing of farm animals is widely applied in practice. As a consequence, scientists have investigated numerous aspects of group housing to help further improve animal welfare and human–animal interactions under these conditions. However, compared to this literature available in farm animals, and the plentiful studies conducted of feral horse populations, there is much less done when it comes to the management of horses kept in groups in the domestic environment. In particular, limited scientific information is available into the effect of group size and group composition on behaviour and methods of introducing new horses into established groups, even though problems related to social integration are repeatedly taken as arguments against keeping horses in groups.

This review, therefore, aims to provide an overview of the current scientific knowledge regarding keeping horses in groups. Furthermore, it aims to give insight into whether or not some of the concerns related to keeping horses in groups are justified and to review scientifically based solutions that could be useful in practice to improve horse welfare and human safety.

Keywords: Equine; Behaviour; Welfare; Housing; Social

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