

Donkey slaughter and skin trade in Africa – post moratorium trends

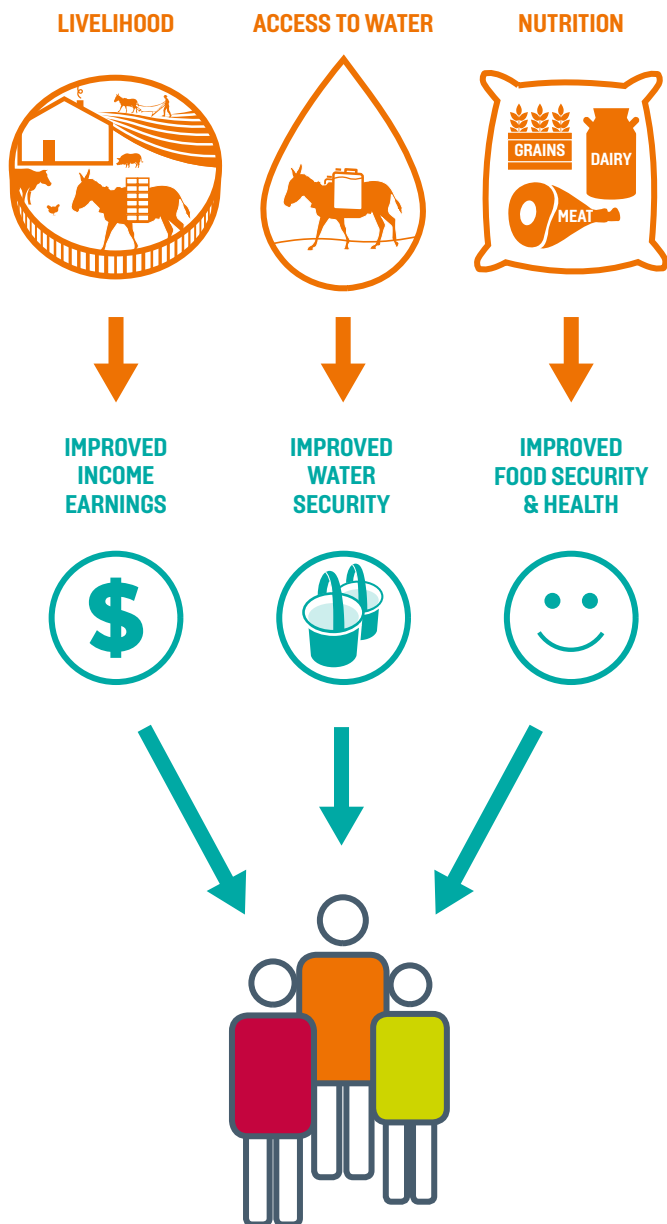
SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

This is a summary of the investigative report commissioned by Brooke East Africa, mapping out trends in the donkey skin trade in Africa one year after the [African Union moratorium to ban the trade](#) was adopted.



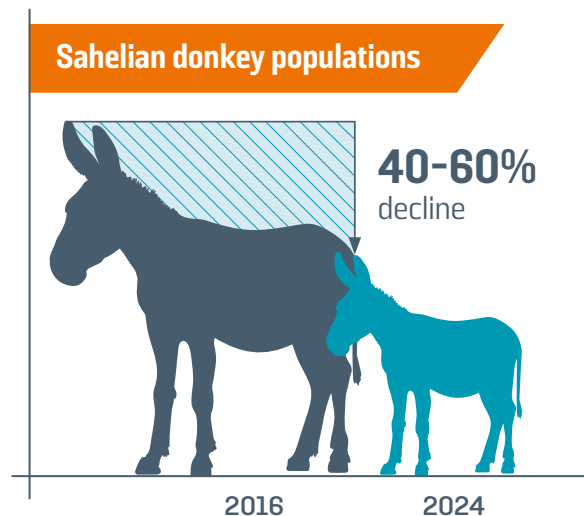
THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF DONKEYS IN AFRICA

Donkeys are the backbone of Africa's economies, working in agriculture, transport, water provision, construction and other sectors, supporting the livelihoods of millions of people. In recent years, the trade in donkey skins to produce ejiao in China, a gelatine made from boiling the skins and used in cosmetic products, has reduced donkey populations in many communities across Africa. This undermines livelihoods and slows progress towards attaining the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), such as ending poverty and hunger.



IMPACT OF THE DONKEY SKINS TRADE

- Between 2012 and 2020, demand for ejiao led to the slaughter of around four million donkeys annually.



- In several Sahelian communities, donkey populations have shrunk by 40-60 percent since 2016.
- In East Africa's highlands and Southern Africa's rural districts, donkey theft for the trade has reduced herds by up to one-third.
- Communities who previously relied on their donkeys to survive are now plunging deeper into poverty. Women and children are the most affected, having to walk longer distances and spend more time on heavy, labour-intensive tasks at the expense of economic or educational activities.
- Bush slaughter causes environmental contamination of soil and water resources, the effects of which have been documented in countries like Burkina Faso and Botswana.
- As donkeys are transported across borders for the trade in their skins, transboundary disease risk is on the rise. Equine influenza, African horse sickness, and encephalosis viruses have been linked to the transboundary transport of live donkeys.

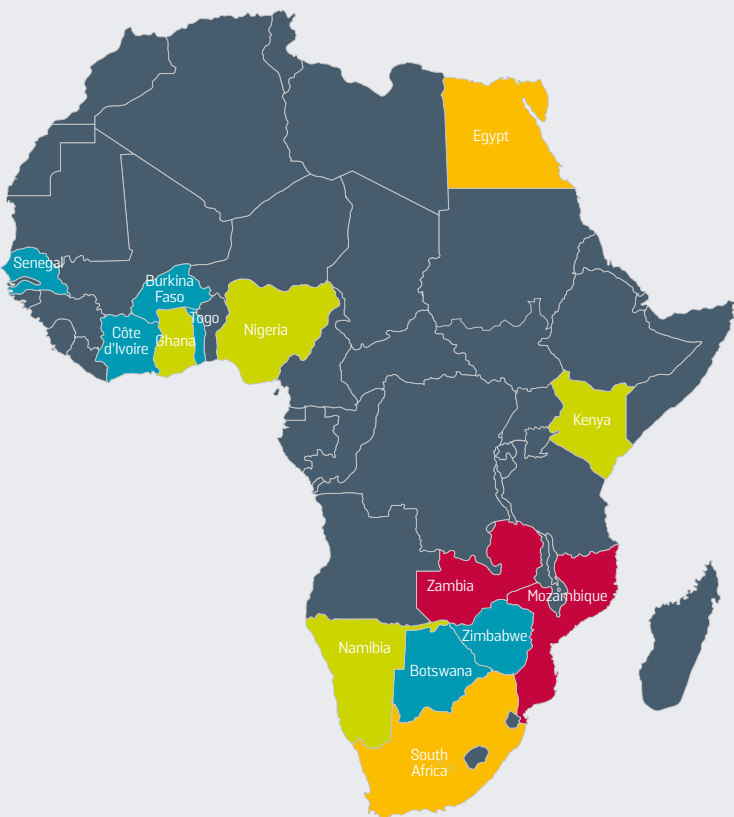


THE MORATORIUM – A KEY MILESTONE TO PROTECT DONKEYS

In February 2024, the African Union adopted a moratorium imposing a ban on the slaughter of donkeys for their skins across the continent. That marks a milestone in the preservation of Africa's donkey species and offers hope for the future. The moratorium called for the development of a Pan-African Strategy for the Development of Donkeys in Africa, which will further safeguard donkeys and the livelihoods of donkey-owning communities.

KEY TRENDS ONE YEAR POST MORATORIUM

While a vital step, the moratorium must be incorporated into national legislation to be binding for AU member states – but the picture is mixed across the continent.



- FULL BAN:** A number of countries, namely Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Botswana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and most recently Togo, have imposed full domestic bans, halting the operations of legal abattoir activity and penalising exports of donkey skins.
- TEMPORARY BAN:** Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Namibia have suspended slaughterhouse licenses via ministerial directives, but without permanent legislation.
- CONTROLLED TRADE:** Egypt and South Africa have adopted a controlled export model, with limits of 10,000 and 10,500 hides per year respectively, while attempting to stop illicit donkey skin trade.
- NO BAN:** Mozambique and Zambia have neither outlawed donkey slaughter for skins nor regulated it, serving as transit corridors for skins trafficked from neighbouring countries.

ILLEGAL TRADE: Restrictions have not ended the trade, but shifted it underground and to more remote areas. For example, despite a formal ban in place in Nigeria, it is estimated that around 500 donkeys are slaughtered every day in open fields, with poor animal welfare and biosecurity standards.

The investigation has identified three primary smuggling corridors:

- The Sahel Atlantic route** funnelling skins from Chad and Niger through northern Nigeria and Ghana to West African ports.
- The Horn Coast corridor** moving animals from Ethiopia and Uganda into Kenya before coastal shipment.
- The Central Southern axis** from Central Africa into South Africa and beyond.

Across these routes, thousands of informal border crossings enable traffickers to falsely declare donkey skins as bovine leather, which is often smuggled alongside wildlife products such as ivory and pangolin scales. As a consequence of the skin trade, donkey meat has appeared at meat markets, labelled as beef or bushmeat.

With the closure of legal abattoirs, bush slaughter persists, bringing welfare, biosecurity and environmental concerns.

REGIONAL TRENDS

CENTRAL AFRICA	The region acts as a conduit in the trade rather than a formal producer. Chad is home to one of the largest donkey herds in Africa and serves as an aggregation hub for the trade from and to other countries, across 1,350 kilometres of uncontrolled borders.
WEST AFRICA	West Africa has been the epicentre of the trade and remains the major corridor through which donkey skins reach Asian markets, despite bans in place. The 2016 Abuja resolution by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has called for bans across the region, but enforcement remains weak and donkeys move across 3,000 informal border crossings, in particular from Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger.
EAST AFRICA	East Africa, particularly Kenya and Tanzania, has played a key role in the global skins trade. The years 2014–2018 saw the peak of commercial slaughter for the trade, with animals being sourced from all neighbouring countries and large-scale abattoirs slaughtering over 1000 animals a day. Those licensed abattoirs have closed down following public protests. In 2019, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) backed tighter border checkpoints and efforts to rebuild the stocks, but enforcement remains a challenge.
NORTHERN AFRICA	The region plays a role in the global trade through illegal transport from neighbouring countries and access to Mediterranean ports, despite national bans and a quota-system in Egypt.
SOUTHERN AFRICA	While only South Africa still allows legal trade at a controlled scale, open borders in the region make illegal trade attractive to traffickers.



KEY OBSTACLES TO FULL ENFORCEMENT OF THE MORATORIUM

1 Legal gaps:

Most countries lack donkey-specific codes on veterinary, customs or trade legislation.

2 Inadequate border surveillance:

Thousands of informal crossings enable unhindered transport of live donkeys and skins across borders.

3 Insufficient deterrents:

Fines for trafficking (\$50-200) are low compared to the black market value of donkey skins (\$35-50 each).

4 Evolving tactics of traffickers:

Smugglers hide donkey skins in legal products to avoid detection or break down cargo into smaller units that are harder to detect. Mislabelling of donkey skins as bovine products is common.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

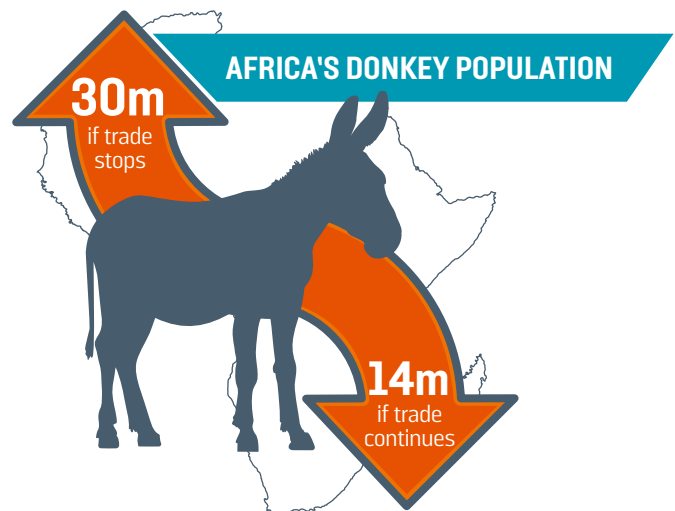
While the donkey skin trade continues despite the moratorium, concerted efforts by both government and non-state actors are disrupting this.

Regional cooperation initiatives, such as by ECOWAS and IGAD, target the trade at sub-regional level. Civil society organisations, such as [Brooke](#), [The Donkey Sanctuary](#) and [Welttierschutz](#), are advocating for policy change, and supporting communities to mobilise and put pressure on the authorities.

Corporate bans are also picking up; [Swire Shipping](#) have added donkey skins to their prohibited cargo lists. Mobile health clinics are expanding services in high-risk areas. Pilot breeding programmes in Nigeria and Burkina Faso are aimed at restoring diminished herds.

PREDICTIONS OF FUTURE TRENDS

If the illicit trade continues at current or increased levels, donkey populations across Africa could shrink from an estimated 23–29 million to 14 million by 2040.



Under full compliance with the moratorium, comprehensive national legislation, veterinary outreach, and supported breeding schemes, donkey populations could recover to 30 million, preserving their role in rural transport systems and boosting economic resilience in vulnerable communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

African Union member states must fully implement the moratorium through formal, national legislation and penalties for trafficking.

Customs authorities must adopt distinct Harmonised System codes for donkey skins and deploy rapid-test kits at major ports and border posts.

Regional task forces, bringing together the police, veterinary services and customs, should patrol critical corridors, supported by community-based intelligence networks.

Increased investment must be dedicated to small-scale, community-led breeding and alternative livelihoods, to restore herds and reduce economic incentives for illicit trade.

The monitoring of equine diseases should be integrated into national veterinary programmes, also promoting the sharing of data between countries to detect and control outbreaks more promptly.



[Access the full report.](#)



Brooke

First Floor, 10 Queen Street Place, London, EC4R 1BE, United Kingdom.

Tel: +44 20 3012 3456

www.thebrooke.org

Registered charity No: 1085760 / All photography: © Brooke