



AGENTS OF CHANGE

Horses, humans and healing relationships

By Nadia Rosenthal

Lloyd Gillespie and Isabel Wolf have a passion for horses and a big dream. Under the banner Riding for Horses, they have undertaken to ride the perimeter of the country on horseback with the central aim of raising awareness of African Horse Sickness, but also to attract support and funding for their horse-welfare project in the Transkei.

The couple chose African Horse Sickness as the main focus for their mammoth cross-country ride because it is a common concern faced by the entire South African equine industry, from the rural poor using cart horses to make a living to the mega-wealthy racing and polo industries.

During the great trek, Gillespie and Wolf also hope to share their passion for horses and their belief in the healing power of the relationship between horse and human.

Their journey has already taken them up the east coast to the Mozambique border, around Swaziland, on the edge of Kruger up to the Limpopo River, all along the rivers at the top of the country and down again along the west coast to Cape Town. By the time they arrived in the Mother City in late September, Gillespie and Wolf had been on the road for one year and three months, with 10 horses to share the load and a support vehicle, but no backup or massive support crew.

The Big Issue caught up with Gillespie and Wolf before they got back in the saddle to head back up the coast to Port Alfred.

“ **We became aware** of African Horse Sickness (AHS) when we were riding four of our horses about 350km from one of our horse-trail businesses in Port Alfred to another at The Haven Hotel in the

Transkei. Two of them fell ill and we had to go through the whole terrifying process of the disease with them. It's basically a virus, so one can only treat the symptoms. Our horses did not die, but many do, and it prompted us to do research into the disease. It was on this journey that our plans for this greater journey were born.

AHS is carried by the zebra and borne by a midge, so it is more prevalent in certain areas of South Africa than others, and these are considered as the 'infected zone'. But that does not mean areas like Cape Town, which is not in the infected zone, are not affected by AHS. It affects the horse industry country-wide in that there are regulations that any horse which travels overseas from anywhere in South Africa has to be quarantined and monitored by a vet for one month in Cape Town. It's a huge deterrent to competing and selling

our horses internationally.

There is currently a vaccine against AHS, but it is not 100% effective. It's also expensive and thus not available to all horse owners in South Africa. It's a controversial issue and there is a big outcry from the equine industry, which is questioning whether enough is being done to control this disease and develop a new vaccine. *Carte Blanche* has done two investigative reports on this subject.

We question whether government is doing enough to protect the South African equine industry...There are nine strains of the virus and the Equine Research Centre at the Veterinary Faculty at Onderstepoort have come up with a vaccine that is 100% effective against one strain of the virus. If this is possible we question why more funding has not been made available to produce a similar vaccine against the other eight strains? It is estimated that a figure of R90m is needed to fund the research and development to produce the vaccines for the other eight strains. The result would be that AHS could be prevented.

We also question whether government understands the value of the equine industry in South Africa. We would like someone or some organisation to take up the important challenge of assessing the exact size and value of the South African equine economy, which includes everything from the role of horses in the rural economy to feed, pharmaceuticals, the veterinary industry, polo, racing, stud farms, events organisation, accommodation and more.

On our journey through the rural areas and farmlands we have also noticed how the horse is used increasingly in farming once again. Farmers we have spoken to have said that they prefer using horses because of the cost of fuel and because horses cause less impact than vehicles on the veld.

Horses are also economically invaluable in poor rural communities. In the Transkei some people find employment based on the fact that they own and can ride a horse for doing things such as monitoring fence lines, roadworks and patrolling. For many who don't have cars and in areas where there are no roads, horses are essential for mobility and communication. They are also used in all kinds of daily activities such as pulling carts, ploughing fields and water and firewood collection.

We started a Transkei Equine Welfare Project in 2008. We received a donation of 600 AHS vaccines by the African Horse Sickness Trust and have vaccinated about 250 rural horses in the last two years. But in doing this and by riding through the country, we have realised the number of horses in need of help and what a difference simple things like deworming and dipping would make to their lives as well as those of their owners.

We plan to expand our project to something similar to the Carthorse Protection Association in Cape Town, where we will have an animal hospital as well as offer training and education around horse handling.

Horse handling is such a big subject and can span everything from grooming and horse-health to a permaculture approach to growing feed. Beekeeping is also part of this approach where the beeswax is used on the horse as a tick deterrent.

Our plan is to set a standard in horse handling education at our project. This would empower those who have trained with us to be able to be considered

for jobs and have easily transferrable skills in the equine industry further afield.

The treatment of horses and the horse-human relationship is very central to our vision. We believe in a non-resistant method of working with horses which has been proposed by [reputed horse trainer] Chris Irwin. He promotes communication with horses the way that they communicate among themselves. This means rather than simply dominating the horse, we try to work with it empathetically and with understanding. It is a much more humane approach and it also encourages our own personal growth and healing. This is why horses are used in therapy for people with mental and psychological issues.

Horses are very sensitive and aware because they are prey animals and they pick up on everything that we do or experience when we are around them. They will react even to our unconscious stuff, our body language and our emotions. They mirror everything that is going on for us, and so learning to work with horses in this way means that we become more self-aware, as well as aware of our impact on those around us. „ TBI

Passion for horses: Isabel Wolf is raising awareness of African Horse Sickness

