

# **HorseConnexion: translating scientific knowledge into easily accessible information for riders, riding teachers and horse owners**

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## **Introduction**

The horse is an important leisure, sport and companion animal with the equine sector generating an increasing share of income in rural economies all over Europe. The role of the horse changed dramatically over the years. Up to the mid-twentieth century horses were mainly used for agriculture, transport and military purposes. Nowadays horses are generally used for leisure and sport and the number of other different purposes for which horses are used is increasing (e.g. therapeutic riding and tourism). Many people at all levels in society are actively involved in horse riding and a large group more passively enjoys competitions in dressage, jumping, racing or other disciplines. These developments clearly have increased the 'social role' of the horse within Europe (EU Equus Report, Helgesson, 2001).

More and more people without prior training or experience use and handle horses (Beerda *et al.*, 2002). The increasing number of people involved in horse-related activities requires constant education in areas such as behaviour, nutrition, training and housing of the horse. At the same time information concerning a wide range of relevant aspects (e.g. horse husbandry and training, horse temperament, matching horses to rider) is not easily accessible.

Keeping horses within a stabled environment and using them for riding, carriage driving or other purposes requires consideration about how these environments and activities affect the welfare of the horse. There has been relatively little research directed towards investigating the welfare of the domestic horse in relation to housing and use, but this is now a growing area (Sondergaard *et al.*, 2002).

Recently more and more research concentrates on the effectiveness of various training techniques and the horse-human interaction (Visser *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, reported effects of training methods, equipment and husbandry systems are being highlighted by scientific research and investigations. However, a translation of new scientific knowledge into easy accessible information for people involved with horses from 'all walks of life' is still clearly lacking.

## **Dissemination of results from equine research**

At international meetings (e.g. the Equine Behaviour Workshop at the 37<sup>th</sup> Congress of ISAE (2003) or the Equine Group Meeting at recent EAAP congresses), it was highlighted that ordinary horse owners/riders, even those working in the equine industry, can find it very difficult to access and apply knowledge arising from equine research. It is also difficult for practical people to read and understand scientific papers on horse related subjects. It appears very difficult for scientists to reach practical horse people to present the results of their research on horses. This gap between scientists and practical horse people makes it difficult to disseminate research results and to apply new knowledge in practice.

To help to solve this problem, the international website *HorseConnexion* ([www.horseconnexion.org](http://www.horseconnexion.org)) has been set up.

## The aim and content of 'HorseConnexion'

The website aims 'to create a connection between science and practice as well as a connection between different countries'.

'HorseConnexion' thus will take knowledge and information on management, training, use, care and welfare of horses that arises from scientific research, and translate this into a clear, accessible and easily understood format. *Horse Connexion* aims to pass on this information to riders, horse owners, teachers, instructors, lecturers, etc, who perhaps do not have access to or are unable to interpret the results of research in equine science as it is traditionally and currently presented.



'HorseConnexion' is at present produced in English, Swedish and Dutch, and provides a platform for horse scientists all over the world to disseminate their results to a wider public. The website was launched on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2005. *HorseConnexion* started with a very small content (at the start there were four articles and one interview available) and wants to gradually grow into a large base of information.

The launch of the website was very successful. In the first week about 1300 visits were recorded. Articles about the website were published in some of the largest Horse magazines in Sweden and on the largest horse sites. In the Netherlands there was information about the website in one horse magazine. Furthermore, we had a lot of positive feedback on the site.

The current layout and of the website can be seen in Figure 1. The website also provides some general information about the aim of *HorseConnexion*, who is behind the site, a legal disclaimer and access to some photos posted on the site (About Us, Important Information and Photo Gallery).

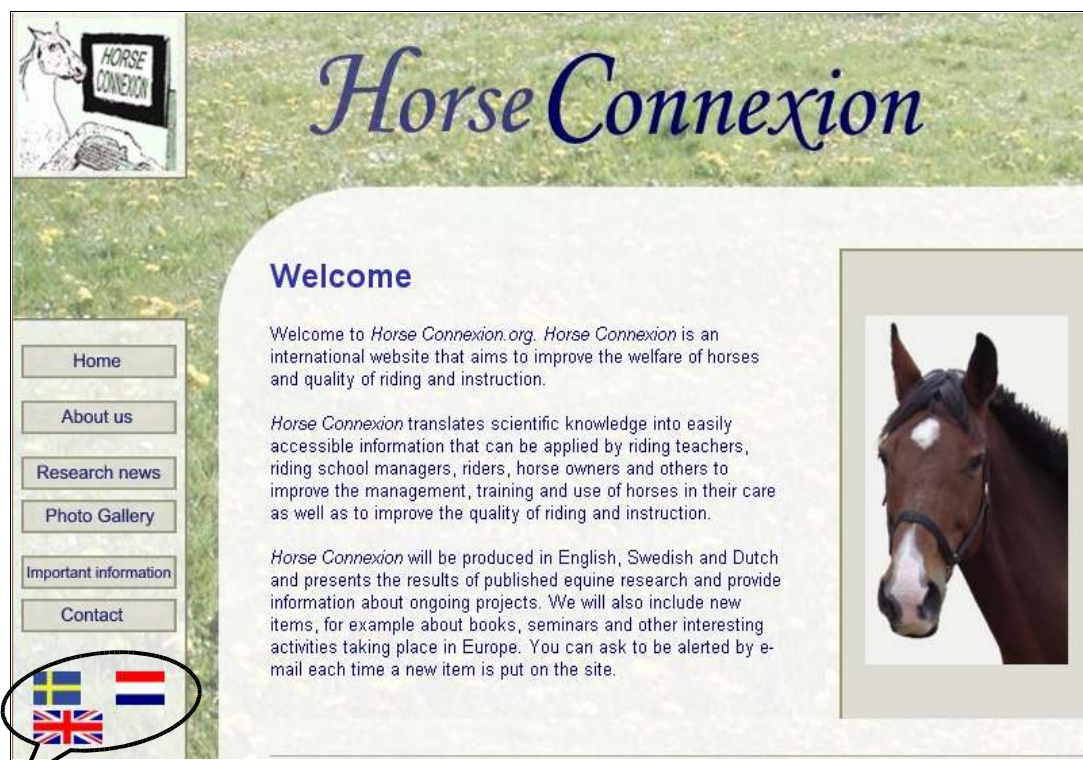


Figure 1:  
Welcome  
Page

Language buttons: Swedish, Dutch, English (German and French to follow shortly)

Under research news – ‘the heart of the site’, news items are divided into subject categories. Current categories are:

- Interview: (interviews with equine researchers or practitioners on their area of expertise/research)
- Training
- Riding
- Housing
- Nutrition
- Behaviour
- Show jumping
- Dressage

For example under the subject heading of interviews currently two records are listed:

Interaction between horse and rider; Interview with Marie Rhodin, PhD student at the Swedish Agricultural University, Uppsala, Sweden

Extra reins cause problems for horses’ backs; Interview with Christopher Johnston, Veterinarian and Researcher, Sweden

To give further examples, the following two articles are currently listed under nutrition and behaviour respectively. Their titles highlight the aim of exploring the practical application of ‘science’. Each of these are based on recently published research papers or conference presentations, but they are also put into a wider context of current scientific knowledge. The source of all articles and related papers are given:

### **Don’t let your horse or pony become fat!**

#### **Sources:**

Johnson, P. J. (2005) ‘Equine Metabolic Syndrome: Mechanisms of insulin resistance and the role of adipose tissue as an endocrine organ’, Proceedings of the 5th International Feeding Conference 2005; Dodson and Horrell Ltd

Ellis, A. D. (2005) Paard en Voer - gezond voeren en beweiden, Roodbont, NL

### **Modern stables limit horses' opportunity for social contact with other horses.**

#### **Sources:**

Sondergaard, E and Christensen, J W ‘A survey of Housing and Management conditions for Horses in Denmark’, 53rd Annual Meeting, EAAP, Cairo, 1–4 September, 2002.

Boonstoppel, M. E. and Schilder, M. B. H., (1996) Stereotypieën bij het Nederlandse paard – (Stereotypic behaviour of horses in the Netherlands) Universiteit Utrecht, Projectgroep Ethologie en Socio-ecologie.

Cooper J. J., McDonald L. and Mills D. S., 2000. The effect of increasing visual horizons on stereotypic weaving: implications for the social housing of stabled horses. Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci. 69(1): 67-83

## **Reader Interaction**

Interested organisations and persons can ask to be alerted by e-mail each time a new item is put on the site. The organisations or people that “sign in” for an alert in the different languages can indicate what areas they are specifically interested in. After two months more than 200 people already signed in to be alerted. In the future the website will also include other information, for example – reviews on books, seminars and other interesting activities taking place in Europe. Hopefully the site can also present information and summaries of conference proceedings and possibly news from interest groups (e.g. EAAP, ISAE and CESMAS) in the near future.

## Who is behind *Horse Connexion*?

The website is an initiative of **Mari Zetterqvist Blokhuis**. Mari is a riding instructor (International Level 3) with long experience of teaching horseback riding. For the last ten years she has taught pedagogy in the education of riding teachers at the National Equestrian Centre in Strömsholm, Sweden. In recent years she has also been working on some studies of didactics in horse riding and cooperation between horse and rider.

**Andrea Ellis** is also contributing to *HorseConnexion*. Andrea has a PhD in Equine Nutrition and has worked in the Netherlands as a scientific researcher in equine nutrition, husbandry and welfare for 4 years until 2004. She is now working as a senior lecturer in Equine Science at Nottingham Trent University. Andrea is involved as a writer and editor.

**Joanna Thorne**, MSc in Equine Sciences has helped to brainstorm the initial idea of *HorseConnexion*.

**Harry Blokhuis** is involved as an 'independent' scientific editor and translates the articles into the Dutch language.

## How do we make *Horse Connexion* trustworthy?

*HorseConnexion* aims to have high standards for the information on the website to make the concept trustworthy. Therefore every scientist from whom published information is used on the website is asked to read and agree on the summary of his/her project and to agree that the summary is published at the website. Under 'Research News' a summary always concludes with some comments/take home message from the 'horse connexion editor or writer' – in italics, to put topics and findings into a wider context and prevent misinterpretation. Thus each summary is not only proofread by the original author of the paper/report which is presented but also by at least 2 editors from *HorseConnexion*.

There will be a "*HorseConnexion Steering Group*" installed consisting of representatives of partners, for example federations in different countries. The Board will meet (possibly through phone conferencing to keep the costs down) once a year to discuss the development and evolution of the website.

A "*HorseConnexion Scientific Board*" consisting of 3-4 people representing some of the larger European scientific groups (for example EAAP, ISAE) will also be installed. Two times a year the Scientific Board will be asked to give feedback and come up with further ideas on the development and content of website.

## Sponsors

The aim is to make the website self-sustainable in terms of funding. Therefore, we will now start to approach organisations that can identify with the goals of *HorseConnexion* and are willing to financially support the site. We would like to increase the functionalities, information, services and contact facilities of the website with their support. The idea is to have "partners" that we work together with and that consist of organisations that represent large groups of owners, riders, firms that have an interest to disseminate and educate and inform their members (like for example national riding sport federations, breeding organisation or clubs for recreation riders). Another level of sponsorship may be from charities that aim to improve the welfare of the horse. Commercial firms that want to advertise their products to the users of *HorseConnexion* will also be potential supporters.

## References:

Beerda, B., Ellis, A. D., Blokhuis, H. J. and Meijering, A., 2002. Mogelijke dierenwelzijnproblemen in de paardenhouderij (Current animal welfare problems in the horse industry), Internal report for the Animal Protection Society (RDA), NL, ID-Lelystad

Helgesson A, Hedberg, A. 2001. The Horse Industry in the European Union. Final report EU Equus 2001, Sweden, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

Sondergaard E., Halekoh U., 2003. Young horses' reactions to humans in relation to handling and social environment. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 84, 265-280.

Visser E.K, Van Reenen, C. G., Hopster, H., Schilder, M. B. H., Barneveld, A., Knaap, J. H. and Blokhuis, H. J. (2001) Learning performance in young horses using two different learning tests. *App Anim Behav Sci.*, 80(4): 311-326

[www.horseconnexion.org](http://www.horseconnexion.org)