Fact Sheet: Domestic Donkey – Miniature Mediterranean

*Equus asinus*

Description:
- **Size:**
  - Length: 6.5 ft (200 cm)
  - Height (shoulder): 3 ft (91.5 cm)
- **Weight:** 400-550 lb (181-250 kg)
- **Sexual dimorphism:** None
- **Physical Description:** Similar in appearance to a small horse, with long ears and a large head, shorter legs and a stockier build.
- **Coloration:** Donkey coloration ranges from come in a variety of base colors, from gray to brown to white. Most donkeys, regardless of coat color, will have dorsal stripes and shoulder crosses, dark earmarks, white muzzle and eye rings, and a white belly and inner leg.

In the Wild

**Habitat and Range:**
- **Geographic range:** Domesticated globally. Wild ancestors originated from North Africa and Arabia.
- **Preferred Habitat:** Highly adaptable. As a domesticated animal, they can be found everywhere, but wild asses prefer warm, dry climates such as deserts.

**Diet:**
- **Herbivorous**
  - Hay, grain, grass, shrubs, and other plants make up most of their diet.
  - At the Zoo, they are fed mostly hay and some mineral supplements.

**Adaptations:**
- A donkey’s hair coat is shed out much later in the summer than that of the horse and serves as protection from the weather and flies.
- Donkeys are social animals and will travel in small to medium sized herds in the wild to help avoid predation.
- Donkeys are well adapted for dry climates
  - They are most active in the morning and evening, resting during the hot parts of the day to conserve energy and water.
  - Their large nasal cavities help them retain moisture well, and long ears help them regulate body temperature.

**Lifespan:**
- In captivity: average of 30-35 yrs, up to 50 years.
- In the wild: average of 25-30 yrs
Ecosystem relationships:
• Predators: in the wild, large apex predators such as lions and wolves are capable of preying upon donkeys, especially foals and old or injured animals.
• Role/ Niche:
  o Donkeys are one of the oldest domesticated animals, with evidence of domestication as far back as 6,000 years ago.
  o They are strong work animals, used as a pack animal and are capable of pulling plows in agriculture.
  o They are also excellent companion animals for both humans and other livestock. Donkeys are often used as companions for wean foals, or for nervous or injured animals, as their gentle disposition is calming. For people, donkeys are commonly used in recreational riding programs for the mentally and physically handicapped due to their nature.

Reproduction:
• Breeding season: Year round in captivity, wet season in the wild.
• Behavior: polygynous. In the wild, asses do not form pair bonds. Dominant males usually get primary breeding rights, but subordinate males are tolerated.
• Gestation: 1 year
• Litter/ Offspring: Usually only 1, twins rare. Young donkeys are called foals.
• Maturation: Foals weaned at 6-9 months. Females reach reproductive maturity at 2-3 years old, males at 7-12 months old.

Activity:
• Crepuscular

Other “fun facts”:
• Donkeys can breed with horses and zebras to produce hybrids which are sterile. A cross between a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare) produces a mule. A cross between a female donkey (jenny) and a male horse (stallion) produces a hinny. A cross between a zebra and a donkey produces a zebrass or a zonkey.
• Miniature donkeys are often said to be harder working animals than standard sized donkeys.
• Donkeys are intelligent animals and decent problem solvers. They are notoriously labeled as stubborn, but in reality are very obedient domestic animals that are simply very cautious and will avoid doing anything that seems dangerous.
• Unlike horses, donkeys do not instantly “bolt” then startled. They usually freeze or run just a few steps, and then look to see what spooked them.
• Foals are highly precocial and are capable of standing, nursing and following their mothers within a few hours of birth.

Conservation Status and Threats:
• Domesticated donkeys are in no danger of extinction. As a domestic animal, they are not listed on the IUCN red list or any endangered species list. Certain breeds of donkeys can be threatened however.
• **Miniature Mediterranean breed**  
  o Miniature donkeys from Sicily and Sardinia were first imported into the United States in the early 1900s. These animals and their descendants were extensively bred with each other and with breeds of unknown ancestry to produce a distinctively American breed called Miniature Mediterranean Donkeys.  
  o The original Mediterranean breeds are nearly extinct today on their native islands, but the American breed is doing well. It is listed as a “recovering” breed by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, a non-profit organization working to conserve historic breeds and genetic diversity in livestock.
• **Some natural populations of wild asses, especially the African wild ass (Equus africanus), which is thought to be the ancestor of domestic donkeys, are endangered.**  
• **Conservation efforts:**  
  o People in the United States and Europe have founded many organizations dedicated to the rescue, preservation, and care of wild, abandoned, or unwanted donkeys.  
  o Feral donkeys (not wild asses) sometimes compete with native wildlife and can be seen as invasive.  
    ▪ In Death Valley National Park, California, feral donkeys were under strict population control for many years because they were competing with desert bighorn sheep for very limited resources, and were thought to be driving them to extinction.  
  o The African wild ass is legally protected in the countries where it is currently found, although these measures often prove difficult to enforce due to socioeconomic problems.  
    ▪ A protected population of the Somali wild ass exists in the Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve in Israel. This reserve began in 1968 with the mission to help recover populations of endangered desert wildlife.

**At the Zoo**  
• The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore houses 2 male miniature donkeys. Their names are Harry and Lloyd, and they were both born in September of 2005.

**What We Can Do**

• Make environmentally responsible lifestyle decisions to help conserve habitat – conserve energy and resources, reduce litter and pollution.  
• Support the conservation efforts of local organizations like The Maryland Zoo as well as organizations working in the field to protect wildlife and conserve habitat.

**References:**  
• [http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Equus_asinus/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Equus_asinus/)  
• [http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/7949/0](http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/7949/0)