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Wadham, H and Dashper, K (2024) The slow road to sustainable tourism: an interspecies perspective on decent work. Journal of Sustainable Tourism. ISSN 0966-9582

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2374361

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Published Version

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Journal of Sustainable Tourism

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Sustainable Tourism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsus20

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To cite this article: Helen Wadham & Katherine Dashper (13 Jul 2024): The slow road to sustainable tourism: an interspecies perspective on decent work, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2024.2374361

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2374361

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JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2374361

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The slow road to sustainable tourism: an interspecies perspective on decent work

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ABSTRACT
Existing understandings of decent work—and the wider 2030 Agenda—are profoundly anthropocentric. This paper explores how focusing on interspecies relations subverts our ideas about decent work and its implications for more sustainable approaches to tourism. Specifically, we bring insights from slow philosophy to bear on fieldwork focused on the shared labour of people and horses involved in forestry and trekking in the UK. Horses emerge as co-workers and epistemological partners, shaping the ways we think about and experience decent work and unsettling people's ideas about space, place and time. The rhythms and needs of these animal workers challenge apparently unassailable characteristics of contemporary working life, enabling us to develop a less human-centred and more energising imaginary for the future.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 October 2023
Accepted 24 June 2024

KEYWORDS
Decent work; horses; human–animal relations; multispecies; sustainability; tourism

Introduction

Since 1999, decent work has been the key primary goal of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It comprises four pillars, namely the promotion of rights at work, employment, social protection, and social dialogue (ILO, 1999). It is embedded within the United Nations 2030 Agenda *via* Sustainable Development Goal 8 ("Decent work and economic growth"). Specifically, Target 8.9 references the role of tourism in creating jobs and promoting local culture and products. As such, decent work is a key component of the global sustainability architecture and has material consequences for the way policies are developed and resources distributed. But it remains significantly underexplored within the academic literature (Pereira et al., 2019). Some question its distinctiveness (e.g. Blustein et al., 2023), while others suggest the fusion of decent work and economic growth within the 2030 Agenda potentially entrenches inequalities and reproduces exploitative labour practices (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). This article addresses a specific limitation that can be levelled at both decent work and the wider 2030 Agenda, namely that it is implicitly and explicitly anthropocentric (Fennell & Sheppard, 2021). This is a significant omission as animals are co-constitutive actors in the production of socioeconomic life, enrolled into capitalist modes of production across Global North and South yet we fail to consider

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meaningfully what this means for them and for us (Barua, 2016; Welden, 2023). The aim of this paper is to explore how an interspecies perspective might extend both our understanding of decent work and its potential for imagining and implementing alternative, more liveable approaches to tourism in future.

The role and status of animals as labouring subjects within particular industries, organisations and society more broadly is often invisible or marginalised (Barua, 2016). However, there is a modest but growing focus on animals' active involvement in work (e.g. Charles & Wolkowitz, 2023; O'Doherty, 2016; Tallberg & Hamilton, 2022) and within tourism specifically (Dashper, 2020b; Rickly & Kline, 2021). This work can be hard and dangerous for both people and animals, and is often poorly paid (from a human perspective). Interspecies work can therefore lead to "shared suffering" within entrenched power relations (Porcher, 2017; Wadham, 2021). Nonetheless, we can and should differentiate the work of "paws" (or hooves) from that of "hands" (Haraway, 2008). Coulter (2016) distinguishes between work done *for*, *with* and *by* animals, noting that the latter is comparatively underexplored (see also Kelemen et al., 2020). However, like people, animals actively invest in and shape work practices (Despret, 2016). We acknowledge that animals (usually) have little or no choice as to whether they join the workforce. Nonetheless, as Sayers et al. (2019) suggest, focusing on them as skilled workers and organisers in their own right can bring new insights to otherwise human concepts.

Animal work within the tourism sector is less extensively examined than in other sectors. A notable exception is Rickly and Kline's (2021) edited volume, which highlights three different kinds of work. *Performative work* centres on animals and their involvement in building the identity of destinations (Yudina & Grimwood, 2016), or delivering experiences at attractions, even if that means sitting still and tolerating human attention (Quintero-Venegas & Lopez-Lopez, 2021). *Value-added work* is where animals' presence adds to the overall tourist experience, or where their work improves or adds quality to tasks performed by their human counterparts (Garcia-Rosell & Tallberg, 2021). Finally, *hidden labour* is often symbolic in nature but also includes animal-to-animal social, emotional and care work. The latter helps animals cope with the stresses of their roles in tourism but also becomes part of tourists' expectations for how animals should behave and perform (Guo, 2021). It bears repeating, then, that animals are integral to tourism practices across many different contexts in Global North and South. As such, for many individuals, working with animals is not a leisure activity or some kind of privilege, but a means of livelihood, a serious business for people and animals alike. For that reason alone, it merits close and serious academic scrutiny.

Our starting point is that work in tourism is often liminal and precarious, and therefore it is not always decent or dignified, whether for people or animals (Rydzik & Kissoon, 2022; Winchenbach et al., 2021). Further, we contend that focusing on people alone effectively limits our understanding about what decent work means and how it is experienced. This paper therefore seeks to develop more meaningful approaches to decent work by paying more attention to the "socialities" (Tsing, 2017, p. 16) or "contact zones" (Haraway, 2008, p. 2) that reach across and between different species, and the way animals themselves actively contribute to processes of value generation (Barua, 2016). As above, this is not a straightforward issue, as we can never claim to know definitively what another animal is "thinking" or "feeling." However, we argue that a parallel argument could be made vis-a-vis our understanding of other people also, and does not absolve us from our moral and practical responsibility to strive for an empathetic approach that at least tries to take into account "other" perspectives than our own (Bekoff, 2010; Birke, 2009).

Our study focuses on understanding decent work within horse–human relations. Domesticated animals have received far less attention from tourism scholars than wild animals, despite their significance within different tourism contexts. Unlike their wilder counterparts, domesticated animals cannot easily withdraw their consent by walking or swimming away (see e.g. Welden, 2023). Horse–human relations represent particularly close and intimate interspecies encounters, built on complex forms of co-developed communication across species boundaries (Wadham, 2021). These relations thus raise particularly thorny questions in the context of decent work.

We focus on two specific environments, namely forestry and trekking, which enable us to (re) consider what decent work might be for both people and animals within the tourism industry.

Horses are often cheaper and more effective than machinery in carrying out forestry tasks, particularly in environmentally vulnerable or hard-to-access sites (Bray et al., 2016; Magagnotti & Spinelli, 2011). Likewise, trekking horses work as both a means of transport and travel companions, mainly in rural areas (Dashper, 2020a; Pickel-Chevalier, 2015). Within these two contexts, the horses involved alternate between performative, value-added and hidden work (Rickly & Kline, 2021). We contend that they contribute not only (horse)power but knowledge. A key characteristic of this multifaceted interspecies work (i.e. work undertaken between people and animals) is that it is often slower than mechanised alternatives. In analysing our findings, then, we draw on "slow philosophy" (Honore, 2004; Sheldon, 2020; Wilson & Hannam, 2017), as a way of reflecting on specific moments when work is (and isn't) decent.

The paper begins by exploring how our ideas about decent work and sustainability are constrained by anthropocentrism. We then consider how slow philosophy helps us develop a less human-centred perspective on decent work. Drawing on multispecies ethnographic data from the UK, we in turn examine how decent work is co-created through the shared work of people and horses, before reflecting on the broader implications this might have for imagining and enacting more sustainable approaches to tourism.

Decent work, sustainability and a lack of animals

The ILO has fashioned the notion of "decent work" into both a substantive legal norm and a specific set of policies, advocating for its significance to individuals and society as a whole (MacNaughton & Frey, 2016; Zekic & Rombouts, 2020). Enshrined within Goal 8 of the SDGs, the so-called Decent Work Agenda thus encompasses the nature of work itself, workers, and the labour market (MacNaughton & Frey, 2016). As such, it is worth reiterating that decent work is a policy framework rather than an academic concept, which partly accounts for the lack of a significant body of scholarly literature. Concentrated within tourism, psychology, business and economics, existing studies enable us to discern at least three characteristics.

First, decent work is a universal and comprehensive idea (Standing, 2008). Its reach extends to all workers everywhere, encompassing regulated or unregulated wage-earners, self-employed, homeworkers or (unpaid) caregivers (Sen, 2000). For all these groups, decent work denotes that it is of an acceptable quality in terms of income, working conditions, job security and rights (MacNaughton & Frey, 2016). Unaligned to any fixed standard or monetary level, decent work can be interpreted differently for different people and in different places: It can thus be applied in very diverse contexts but risks becoming little more than an "infinitely elastic slogan" (Standing, 2008, p. 377). To define whether work is decent, then, we perhaps need to take into account the type, quality, and distribution of work in question (Rai et al., 2019). More critical writers thus suggest that (decent) work is not an ahistorical, apolitical and natural feature of society, but a phenomenon and ideology that requires critical scrutiny (Gerold et al., 2023; Kreinin & Aigner, 2022).

Second, from an "institutionalist" perspective, decent work represents a potential means for promoting social progress. Emerging in parallel to broader debates about sustainability, an emphasis on personal remuneration and fair working conditions has given way to discussions about how decent work might address the challenges of creating a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable future (Zekic & Rombouts, 2020). By contrast, more critical perspectives (often Marxist in nature) focus on the relations between labour, capital, the state and consumers. From this standpoint, all work (decent work included) is a form of exploitation that does little to challenge underlying structural obstacles and power imbalances (Bianchi & de Man, 2021; MacNaughton & Frey, 2016). They are thus particularly critical of the way decent work and economic growth are grafted incongruously together within SDG8, advocating instead for a transformation in the way we organise work and human action in general (Kreinin &

Aigner, 2022; Robra & Heikkurinen, 2020). In these "postgrowth" futures, some anticipate we will work less (Buhl & Acosta, 2016), others that we will work more but in better jobs (Mair et al., 2020), while a third group aims to denaturalise the very notion of work and remove it from the centre of our individual and shared lives (Hoffman et al., 2024).

Third, the ILO's vision is of decent work as aspirational, encapsulating people's pursuit of opportunity, rights, recognition, fairness and gender equality (Pereira et al., 2019). However, the positive possibilities of decent work have been neglected in comparison to its role in highlighting violations of negative freedoms such as modern-day slavery (Timmerman, 2018). Blustein et al. (2023) thus suggest that the aspirational potential of the decent work agenda has been compromised. Together with Pereira et al. (2019), they call for research that moves beyond a deficit approach in order to explore the usefulness of the decent work framework, and develop more contextualised analyses of the indicators against which it is traditionally measured. These calls are echoed by more critical writers too. For example, Mair et al. (2020) suggest that a central challenge of advancing the discussion of postgrowth futures is the difficulty of finding appropriate models. They turn to historical utopian fiction but radical alternatives might potentially be found closer to home as well.

Within both institutionalist and critical considerations of decent work, there has been little or no consideration of what it "means" for animals working in tourism in particular. In other sectors, animals are often relegated to a supporting role in an otherwise human story. In recent studies on decent work in agriculture, animals are in the background, providing power (Zhou et al., 2018) or supplying raw materials (Muthui et al., 2019). Their role as workers themselves—and whether the work they undertake is "decent"—is largely overlooked. As argued throughout, this oversight is rooted in a historical tendency to prioritise human over more-than-human concerns. In addition, uncomfortable debates about the moral implications of sentience and cognitive capacities perpetuates the exclusion or marginalisation of animals within discussions about more ethical approaches to work (Bekoff, 2010; Birke, 2009).

The anthropocentrism of decent work is not a side issue. Rather, the remarkable absence of animals from the shared ILO/UN agenda constrains our ability to imagine alternative and different patterns of relating to the earth and the more-than-human cohabitants who share it with us (Policarpo et al., 2018). Anthropocentrism is therefore a major limitation of the 2030 Agenda in general and decent work in particular, curtailing its potential for imagining and subsequently creating more just and equitable working futures for all. In practice, work undertaken with animals is often inherently slow in nature, taking account of the physical characteristics of the species or individual animals in question, and the multispecies rhythms that shape their everyday lives and work. In the next section, we introduce the theoretical perspective of slow to help develop a broader and less human-centred approach to decent work and the SDGs in and beyond tourism.

A slow perspective on decent (interspecies) work

Shorthand for competing yet mutually dependent philosophies of life, "fast" is busy, controlling and superficial, while "slow" is calm, receptive and reflective (Honore, 2004). The fast pace of everyday life in late capitalist society undermines the possibility of decent work as it impedes our ability to connect with the world around us (Honore, 2004; Stengers, 2018). Whether in academia, disaster management or hospitality, when we work quickly, we are less likely to question or re-examine what we are doing and why (Burbules, 2020).

By contrast, slowing down enables us to engage meaningfully with the work at hand. It offers a way to recalibrate our lives, labours and societies, by reweaving the bounds of interdependency with all the beings around us (Honore, 2004; Kahneman, 2011; Stengers, 2018). Applying ideas of slow philosophy thus helps question existing paradigms and conventions of thought about work and other forms of human action. Existing research focuses on slow food

(Clancy, 2018), slow cities (Raco et al., 2018), slow science (Stengers, 2018), and—increasingly—slow tourism.

Moira et al. (2017) define slow tourism as that which enables tourists to develop a deeper connection with places, people and cultures. As such, they suggest it is not a new paradigm but simply reclaiming what "all" tourism should be, namely a respite promising rest, relaxation and connection with others. However, others see it is a new type of tourism, which deliberately disrupts the dominant "cult of speed" (Fullagar et al., 2012; see also Conway & Timms, 2010). For example, Wilson and Hannam (2017) explore how the comparative slowness of VW campervans opens up material, emotional and imaginary possibilities for their enthusiast owners. From a sustainability perspective, then, slow tourism presages approaches that are potentially less damaging to local communities and the environments in which they live (Mavric et al., 2021).

A slow lens thus illuminates how we might actively subvert the damaging conditions of late capitalist society (Taylor, 2020). First, it highlights the relational practices in our daily lives, potentially cultivating a more ethical approach to the everyday and encouraging work of superior quality (Trakakis, 2018). Working slowly and carefully, the philosopher and skilled manual labourer alike "[look] cautiously before and aft…with doors left open (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 9). Working slowly thus enables us to appreciate solidarity with others as an actual experience rather than an abstract imperative (Crawford, 2009). Taylor (2020) suggests this solidarity extends into the more-than-human world: Knowing comes not from standing at a distance but from ongoing, material engagement (Taylor, 2020). In helping us attend to the thing-ness of things, then, slow philosophy effectively decentres the human. It places us in relation with more-than-human beings and the world we share, thereby potentially expanding our understanding of decent work with regard to both people and animals.

Second, with emphasis on the journey rather than the destination, slow draws attention to the link between pace and place (Burbules, 2020; Parkins & Craig, 2006). To use Wittgenstein's (1990) analogy, when in the city we only learn our way by walking around: This inevitably entails getting lost, retracing our steps and approaching the same place from multiple points. This "attentive responsiveness to the unforeseen and unexpected" makes possible the disclosure of some kind of "truth" (Trakakis, 2018, p. 230; see also Heidegger, 1968). But it cannot be rushed. Rather, it is a kind of "letting be," through which we relinquish our habitual, purposeful and goal-oriented approach in favour of a more thoughtful (but not passive) form of attunement or dwelling (Heidegger, 1968; Trakakis, 2018). Places and communities can of course be sites of oppression as much as emancipation. Nonetheless, at a time when space seems less "grounded" and more "virtual," slow philosophy illuminates how decent work embeds us within community, material reality and the wider natural and socioeconomic environment (Parkins & Craig, 2006).

Third, the notion of slow—like that of decent work—is holistic and all-encompassing. When we work slowly, we are better able to engage with what we are doing both cognitively and physiologically (Trakakis, 2018; Wittgenstein, 1990). For example, fixing an engine "helps us get a handle on the world in a literal and active sense" (Crawford, 2009, p. 7). But whether manual or mental, slow work constitutes a set of ongoing, known practices or habits that bind us to each other, to our environment and to the world (Massumi, 2015). Tinkering and experimenting, we continually work and rework these figurations of experience within known contours (Law & Mol, 2002; Taylor, 2020). These specific practices in turn prepare the ground from which intuitive leaps can occur (Sennett, 2008). Thus it is precisely routines and a slower pace of work that ultimately lead to paradigmatic shifts in practice and thinking (Burbules, 2020; Kahneman, 2011). Slow philosophy might therefore help us re-imagine the kind of (shared) worlds we want to live and work in with our animal neighbours.

In summary, with its focus on the relational, spatial, cognitive and physical, slow philosophy brings a helpful analytical perspective to decent work. The next section explores how we brought this perspective into conversation with multispecies ethnography in order to examine decent work in less human-centred ways.

Research approach and methods

Work for, with and by horses and other equids (donkeys and mules) differs according to geographic, sociocultural and economic context. Across the Global South, this interspecies work—in agriculture, transport and elsewhere—is often essential to sustaining human lives and communities, with many human and animal workers alike facing poverty and extremely poor standards of living (e.g. Watson et al., 2022). In rich countries like the UK, the stakes tend to be lower. Horse–human relations unfold largely within the sport and leisure sectors and are not necessarily economically productive. However, in our chosen settings—forestry and trekking—horses are indeed both social and economic actors. Both contexts offer the opportunity to examine interspecies work from a slow perspective, and to reflect on its role in understanding and enacting different approaches to sustainability.

We embraced the practice of multispecies ethnography. First proposed by Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), this is a new mode of research that centres on "how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic and cultural forces" (p. 545). Incorporating perspectives from anthropology, geography, ecology, history, science and technology studies, multispecies ethnography is increasingly being employed in research related to tourism (e.g. Brondo, 2019; Danby & Grajfoner, 2022; Dashper, 2020a, b). This attempt to understand practices, experiences and relationships at least partly on the terms of other species represents a paradigm shift. It is effectively a political move, which requires us to acknowledge the potential power balances at play within such encounters (Barua, 2016; Clancy et al., 2022; Madden, 2014).

Over a 12-month period from mid-2022, we employed multiple ethnographic methods to capture nuances of horse-human work in the UK. We attended events at which loggers displayed their practices, watching human-horse combinations work together to clear forest areas and shift heavy logs to maintain and sustain tourism and heritage environments. While loggers are often self-employed individuals, trekking is usually organised *via* family-run businesses. As customers ourselves, we visited a range of trekking centres, riding across beaches, woodland, hills and moorland. Within both settings, we engaged in informal conversations with all the humans involved in these practices and watched and interacted with the horses at work and rest, drawing on ethological insights from equine science and our lifelong experiences of working, playing and living with horses (Dashper & Buchmann, 2020). This was recorded in field diaries and through photographs and videos.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with human workers which were audio recorded and transcribed, to supplement our observations and emerging insights. Despite their focus on (human) language, interviews can open generative possibilities and bring animals to the fore: Particularly when combined with participant observations as in this case, they can enable us to explore the affective, emotional and embodied relationships between humans and other species (Clancy et al., 2022; Dowling et al., 2017). These interspecies sensations are difficult to convey, but we nonetheless do our best to share our sense of the "speculative wonder" they can inspire (Ogden et al., 2013). In what follows, then, we remain cognisant of Birke's (2009) question "what's in it for the animals?" As we attempt to explore whether these forms of interspecies work can be considered "decent," we try and question this for the horses, as well as the human participants.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we introduce the findings from our multispecies ethnography of human-horse interactions in forestry and trekking. We draw on slow philosophy—specifically its emphasis on relationality, spatiality and holism respectively—to explore how an interspecies perspective helps us reconsider our ideas about decent work.

Irreplaceable work colleagues: relationality in interspecies work

The pace of work in contemporary capitalist organisations is often fast, hectic and dehumanising, as workers are driven by demands imposed by automation and profit that raise complex questions about worker rights and social justice (Arat & Waring, 2022). Working with horses requires a different temporal approach, one based on evolving interspecies relationships, and the rhythms, movements and capacities of the animals involved. For many of our human participants, this is one of the pleasures of working with horses, adapting to equine ways of working rather than constantly rushing to meet human-imposed time pressures. This work can be described as slow as it is driven more by need than imposed capitalist demands. However, slowness is not an absolute: Other animals are often adept at working in different environments and can accomplish tasks far more effectively than humans. This is illustrated by the following narrative about forestry worker Ben and his horse Freddie:

> Through the wood we can see movement and hear rustling and jingling. We see Freddie first. Travelling confidently and quickly over the rutted ground, he avoids stumps and other obstacles, and makes light work of the steep incline. Behind him on a chain, he pulls a hefty trunk. But Freddie does not appear in any way encumbered, even breaking into a trot in places. Ben is visible further back, holding the reins that attach to Freddie's harness and giving occasional verbal commands. As they approach, they manoeuvre quickly and Freddie deposits the log in perfect alignment atop a growing pile. Only when this task is complete does Ben acknowledge us. Freddie stands quietly, panting a little but quickly regaining his breath.
>
> "If I chuck the reins like that he knows that's the handbrake," says Ben. "He knows his job better than I do." Freddie usually works without reins as it allows him to set the pace: "If we've got hold of a big one," Ben says "he doesn't have to wait for me. He likes to pick the route himself."
>
> Freddie, visibly impatient, keeps turning round to look at Ben. "He knows the difference between down time and working time," says Ben apologetically. "When it's working time, he wants to work." And we watch as the two of them head back into the trees.

Compared to machines, horses can only move one log at a time yet their work is not necessarily slow in other ways. We were amazed at the speed and dexterity of horse and human partner as they manoeuvred through dense woodland with often massive logs. Both horse and human moved quickly, confidently, able to negotiate standing trees, bracken, even people and dogs out for a walk. What Honore (2004) calls the "tempo giusto" (right speed) is negotiated, then, between the two sides of these interspecies partnerships. We see this in our trekking examples also:

> "I would say to people, 'are you alright to canter here?'" says Shona, who runs a family-owned centre next to a national park. "And people would say 'no!'… But the horses want to get going, even where you have really rough ground." Our group are reluctant at first. But they gradually relax as the horses set the pace, before reaching the top of the hill laughing, breathless and exhilarated. "You see.?" says Shona. "It's surprising how little you feel that rough ground when the horses know what they're doing."

Speed is negotiated between people and horses but also between horses themselves. At the same demonstration day where we met Ben and Freddie, we also come across Susie, Kermit and Flo. Deep within a more established section of the wood, the huge trunks here require two horses to pull them out.

> "We haven't brought the equipment to work them together," says Susie, who is instead improvising by attaching chains separately to each horse. She jumps clear and asks them to pull. Flo is clearly setting the pace. She is also putting more effort in and Susie turns indignantly to Kermit to tell him so. He leans into his harness and inches ahead of Flo, before the two of them gradually settle in shoulder to shoulder, heading back towards the track with the trunk thudding along behind them.

These examples show us that slow work is not a generic idea but an actual, material experience, which builds solidarity between specific individual actors (Crawford, 2009). Horses (and people) respond in different ways depending on who they are working with.

> Another day, we are watching a training session in the arena alongside would-be logging apprentice Robert. Susie and Kermit are demonstrating neat figures of eight, before Susie hands the reins over to Robert. Almost imperceptibly, Kermit's pace slackens and he gradually zigzags away from the track. To anyone watching, it looks like Robert is doing exactly what Susie was doing moments before. But Kermit can tell the difference. Finally, wandering into the middle, he turns around and - kindly but implacably - contemplates his new handler.

On other occasions, horses will look after rather than exploit human inexperience or frailty. One of our trekking participants recalls a much-missed elderly mare:

> "She was a heck of a handful!" she says "Everytime I would get on she would go like a rocket. But if you put a beginner on her back she would carry them like they were made of glass."

This focus on the slow character of horse–human work—and the way it illuminates the relational and ethical practices that unfold between specific human and nonhuman actors—builds our understanding of decent work in at least three ways. First, it shows how even (or perhaps especially) hard physical work can be a source of shared pleasure (Sennett, 2008; Trakakis, 2018). The satisfaction generated by felling a particularly big tree or negotiating a tricky path appears to cross the species barrier: At the logging demonstration day, Freddie, Kermit and Flo were visibly enjoying their work, and responded to interruptions by fidgeting with buckets or pawing the ground as their humans chatted to us. Likewise, trekking staff describe how horses perk up when paired with a more experienced rider. This aligns with the idea that where work brings autonomy and life satisfaction, it can also be a source of socially and ecologically sustainable modes of living (Gerold et al., 2023). Our findings indicate that these benefits might accrue to animals as well as people.

Second, our findings illuminate how decent work depends on care as an actual experience rather than abstract imperative (Crawford, 2009; Taylor, 2020), and one in which danger is never far away. More than one of our respondents noted how their relationship with their horses had prevented serious injury to themselves or others: "Jim had stopped dead before I even had the chance to yell out" recalls one horselogger, describing how their equine partner's quick thinking saved them from a broken leg. Whereas Mair et al. (2020) turn to utopian fiction to imagine radical postgrowth alternatives, we believe this and other examples in our data provide a compelling vision of decent work both future and present.

Third, these powerful and particular interspecies relations build solidarity but also increase mutual vulnerability (Coulter, 2016; Porcher, 2017). Several participants described the financial and emotional toll of losing equine partners. It can take years to train up a new horse, which has a very real impact on profitability. Similarly, the joy and sadness with which people reminisce about long-dead horses suggests that however good a new partner may eventually be at their job, they never "replace" the one who came before. This shared vulnerability extends beyond the dyad in question to the wider logging and trekking communities as a whole, which are perhaps particularly susceptible to both climatic and socioeconomic changes around them. Thus our study confirms the need for collective action that urges both a transformation in the way we organise work and a specific reformulation of SDG8 that decouples decent work from economic growth (Robra & Heikkurinen, 2020).

A time and a place: spatiality in interspecies work

Slow work is always a situated phenomenon, which enables a patient and thoughtful attunement to the immediate and wider world around us (Parkins & Craig, 2006; Trakakis, 2018). In turn and over time, this potentially enables us to understand how decent interspecies work embeds people and animals within the community and the wider socioeconomic environment.

The interspecies partnerships we encountered are part of the local community. Brian began working with horses in his logging business in the early nineties, starting each morning by travelling along the dual carriageway outside their home:

> "You could travel them eight or nine miles to a job and work… We'd have chainsaws and petrol cans… and three lads on the cart. We'd stop and fill up with chainsaw fuel. They used to laugh when I pulled into the petrol station."

Likewise, Shona describes the response from those living nearby when her trekking centre relocated:

> "It surprised me because I always thought we were a bit of a pain slowing things down, clattering through with everybody nosing in the gardens… [but] they all really miss the horses."

Unfolding also within a wider socioeconomic context, interspecies work in turn brings confrontations between different temporal regimes. In particular, it requires navigating between abstract "clock time" and what Holloway (2010; p. 229) calls "our time… that [which] springs from our lives."

> Joe describes his typical day in the woods, with maybe two hours of work followed by 20-minute breaks, throughout the day. Dinnertime is 45 minutes, to give the horses a proper rest. Bringing two horses with him enables him to be more productive. "It's not that you go faster," he clarifies, "but you can get more logs out in the same time." Another logger, Simon, says the horse knows it's knocking-off time before he does: "You can both get tired and inattentive… At a certain point, Perry will jib, he won't stop fidgeting… and we'll just pull out for the rest of the day."

In contrast, as unambiguously commercial enterprises, trekking centres adhere more closely to clock time: Rides go out at set times of the day, and clients pay for a specific time-limited experience e.g. a 90-minute beach ride. Around this, however, the needs of the horses are central and help shape the rhythms of the working day. Horses need caring for before and after the paid-for ride, and this shapes the behaviours of both centre staff and customers:

> As we're talking to the centre manager Liz, there is the sound of hooves on concrete and the ride returns to the yard. The ride leader tells the three clients – all children aged between 10 and 14 – to line up their horses in front of her. Two of the children dismount, run up the stirrups on their saddles and lead their horses away to the stables. The third child, Josh, jumps off and walks towards his waiting mother, leaving his pony, Ebony, standing alone in the yard. Liz calls out to Josh and asks him what he thinks he's doing? He knows he needs to sort out Ebony before himself. Josh sighs, but doubles back and takes up her reins. "Come on," he says, "let's take you back for your tea." Ebony nudges Josh gently with her nose and he giggles as they both head towards her stall.

In this example, the client (Josh and his mother) have paid for a ride which takes up a set amount of time. The ride is finished, and so Josh appears to think that is the end of his involvement, but Liz reminds him that his role is not complete until Ebony is taken care of. This post-ride care—taking the horse back to the stable, removing the tack, putting on a rug if needed, offering water and food—is not part of the timed and paid-for experience, but it is necessary when the work involves another living creature with needs of her own. Riding centre staff like Liz teach clients to consider the needs of the horses, and to always put these before their own when they return from a ride. This slows down the experience, extending the time involved beyond the paid-for activity. Ebony knows that she will be cared for so she waits patiently. Her gentle nudge effectively reminds Josh not to forget about her. Together, they return to the barn, thereby ensuring that horse, as well as human, needs are accounted for.

As living creatures, horses need care, which depends on routine tasks that cannot be circumvented by the human who delivers it, whether a fellow worker or even a paying customer. This all points to a certain slowness in work with horses, encompassing deliberateness, rest and repetition. This does not mean that work with horses is always slow in pace, or free of human-centric demands of capitalist organisations and clock time. But it does encourage a reorientation to work that considers the needs and abilities of the horses involved. Waiting is essential—for the horses to recover from physical exertion, or to eat their feed, for example—and this brings about opportunities for humans to pause and connect with the horses with whom they are working. Work with horses encourages the humans—co-workers and clients—to reimagine and remember that this is a shared world they inhabit, one where horse needs and abilities also matter and influence working relationships and practices.

In summary, then, decent interspecies work emerges as a vocational activity, which ties humans and horses to a specific place and time. Trekking centres run to a tight schedule, while horse loggers have a keen sense of how much timber they must extract to cover their costs and generate a profit. But foregrounded on an ongoing basis—in talk and practice—are the rhythms and requirements of the horses involved. These are nested in turn within ecological and seasonal rhythms, which shape what tasks can be accomplished. As such, work emerges as a relation between society and "nature" (Kreinin & Aigner, 2022). Within this so-called sustainable work concept, interspecies partnerships often prioritise the journey over the destination (Burboles, 2020). But this is not a romanticisation. On the contrary, horse loggers for example are hostile to those they perceive as not taking the work seriously: "It's not about playing with ponies!" we were told on more than one occasion. In this sense, while participants effectively "denaturalise" work by showing an alternative vision of a more ecologically embedded, interspecies approach, they nonetheless stop short of visions of postwork, in which work is no longer the centre of our lives (Gerold et al., 2023). Likewise, they are pragmatic about combining more traditional methods with chainsaws, forwarding trailers and other machinery. To use Heidegger's (1968) term, "attunement" to the needs of their horses is thus bounded by an awareness of the material reality in which they are all working.

Meaningful and multisensory: the holistic character of interspecies work

When we work slowly, we are better able to engage with what we are doing, both mentally and physically (Trakakis, 2018; Wittgenstein, 1990). Slow work constitutes a set of ongoing habits that bind us to each other and to the world around us. It is precisely its repetitive and routine nature that means slow work opens up spaces within which intuitive and imaginative leaps can occur (Burboles, 2020; Kahneman, 2011). From an interspecies perspective, horses themselves contribute knowledge, which is often intangible and embedded within the natural-social environment. Decent interspecies work thus demands a multisensory awareness of each other and the outside world, which exposes the physiological, cognitive and embedded character of this work.

During our fieldwork, it was obvious that horses bring not only physical power but knowhow to their work. For example, Shona recalls how Percy provides "back up" when taking out a group of nervous riders:

> "Looking over my shoulder, I…saw [one of the riders] leaning dangerously to the left. But Percy started to swerve out of line to the left and picked up his left shoulder…and then she went over to the right, so he went the other way to try and balance her again. The things he did to keep her on board… He gave me the time to just slow up enough so that we could sort her out…and not end up losing her."

Participants suggested that the value of the horses' contribution to interspecies work is enhanced by their multisensory awareness of the wider environment, which is often more acute than that of the humans involved. That is, horses think within the specific context in which they find themselves. For example, Simon recalls working with Perry on a site adjoining a peat bog:

> "It was like working on a mattress, it bounced under your feet… The horses would bring logs out on a path three or four times and then you could see them thinking 'this doesn't feel right,' the structure of the ground was starting to give way… and they would find another way out. You always have to be listening to your horse really. To see where they are happiest working."

Horses are sensitive to changes in the environment in ways that humans are not. They can pick up on cues and act to prevent accidents or difficult situations, as Rae explained about her trekking horses on the beach:

> "Usually it's fine to ride in the water, in the breakers, and that's what tourists want a lot of the time, the dream of cantering through the waves. But sometimes the sand shifts and it's less stable and my horses know that and won't go near the water. They tell us, 'no, I'm not stepping on that, it's not safe' and I wouldn't have known that just by looking at the sand."

As argued throughout, while often unfolding in picturesque settings, this is nonetheless serious work that sustains families and communities and contributes to the tourism industry in multiple ways. If we are to "reclaim" the economy by directing it away from generating profit to fostering the conditions to support life, this requires emotional as well as rational intelligence (Weeks, 2011). Our findings suggest that on that basis horses (and no doubt other animals) are potentially willing and able partners in that process.

Humans and horses communicate through multisensory means, whether through body-to-body contact when riding, down the reins or with the voice. Loggers often prefer to work by voice alone, as this enables horses to think for themselves:

> "If I go in with two ponies who are used to the job," says Brian, "I'll load one up and let it go out to the conversion vehicle on its own. Free-headed. And…I'll have somebody at the conversion vehicle, converting timber, cross cutting it and stacking it. And… the horses go out on their own and stop at the conversion bay and your man will take the timber off…So long as they know the route out, they can work on their own."

In the context of trekking tourism, the ride leader and horse remain in communication with each other, even when another human (the tourist) is riding the horse in question, as Tessa explained:

> "Rupert… I can voice control him. So if he did trot past me, I can tell him 'walk' and he'll just walk. It doesn't matter what the customer's doing. They'll be like, 'I didn't even ask him to do that then.' And I was like, 'No, but I did, and he knows better!'"

However, while horses and people alike appear to relish the challenges of interspecies work, not all work is decent. For example, even when regular work dries up during nesting season, some loggers like Joe will actively avoid bracken rolling, in which the invasive stems are knocked back by a horse-drawn roller:

> "I do it because sometimes you have to and it pays money. But it's horrible work for the horses as well. It could be head height… [it's] horrible ticky nastiness!"

Others like Susie revel in taking on this specific task. This confirms Mair et al.'s (2020) assertion that where coercive forces are removed and people are free to choose, they will tend to gravitate towards work they believe to be socially useful, even jobs that are commonly believed to be challenging, difficult or simply unenjoyable. As with the concept of slowness itself, then, what constitutes decent work cannot be defined in absolute terms. Rather, people and horses have their own limits. For example, Susie says one of her horses really dislikes working in boggy conditions:

> "I could have made Zippy go and just deal with the mud. But if I've got these two and they don't mind, then I'll just take them and leave him at home."

Our human participants believe horses enjoy work and the physical and cognitive challenges it brings. Simon says "*the worst thing you can ever do with a horse that's worked all its life is to turn it away in a paddock… They pine away to nothing*." Yet, people also suggest that decent work needs to have a point or a value to it for horses as much as people, and this too varies between individual actors:

> Kermit and Flo, the duo who we saw in action at the demonstration day, are quite happy to teach people and participate in exhibitions. "They went to the [county] show last year," says Susie, "For the whole week they were just going round and round in circles." But they loved all the attention and "faffing about" as

> she describes it. By contrast, her old horse Tiggy had no patience for performing. “She was a serious workhorse,” says Susie. “At a show, you do one log forward and then take it back again. So Tiggy would take it out and then go like ‘I’m not taking it back in again, that’s not real work!’”

Decent work can potentially be seen as a baseline prerequisite for achieving “meaningful” work, that which is personally significant and worthwhile (Blustein et al., 2023). Our study demonstrates that more meaningful work is also significant for the wellbeing of nonhuman workers in tourism. Tessa described how she knows when one of her trekking horses is ready to retire:

> “If they start getting more injuries, if I notice they’re lame more often then maybe it’s time for them to take things easier. Or if they start getting moody or bad-tempered and start kicking the others…then I think they’ve had enough.”

Tessa has downsized her trekking business recently and believes the horses prefer the quieter environment and the slower pace of work, which enables her to care more closely for them as well.

> “Now it’s just me… When I’m grooming them, I’m checking them, making sure they’ve not got any cuts or lumps of anything and because I’m the only one doing that, I notice any changes and I think that’s a massive thing. If there’s lots of different people grooming them, you don’t know what’s normal for that horse. Whereas I do. I know immediately if something’s not right.”

Slowing down, in this case through a deliberate decision to scale down the commercial operation, opens up time and space for close, embodied, relational encounters that contribute to decent work for humans and horses.

Conclusions

This paper has proposed that a focus on interspecies relations helps expand our ideas about the understanding and practice of decent work. Within SDG8, the tourism industry is singled out for its potential to create jobs and promote local culture and products. However, (human) work in tourism is often precarious, poorly paid and not “decent” at all (Giddy, 2022). By way of conclusion, we reflect briefly on how a less human-centred approach to decent work—such as that outlined here—might contribute to more sustainable approaches to tourism.

First, existing studies suggest that—as an integral feature of the multilateral policy landscape—decent work represents an endlessly elastic idea (MacNaughton & Frey, 2016). By exploring decent work from an interspecies perspective, we have illustrated that decent work indeed represents different things to different people (and animals) in different places. We therefore agree with Rai et al. (2019), who suggest that we should focus our critical efforts less on the “end” of work and more on the type, quality and distribution of work. This suggests in turn that more sustainable models of tourism will inevitably require negotiation, experimentation and “tinkering,” (Law & Mol, 2002; Taylor, 2020) but that certain factors—such as prioritising the safety of human and animal workers—are non-negotiable.

Second, the assumption that decent work represents a potential lever for wider socioeconomic change is based on its explicit and problematic conflation with economic growth within SDG8 (Frey, 2017). By adopting a less human-centred approach, we have shown that, despite prevailing structural and power relations, the needs of animals—their rhythms and requirements—often take precedence for the people who work with them. Thus, perhaps in contrast to postwork scholars such as Kreinin and Aigner (2022), we would take a more optimistic view that we can prioritise the contribution that work makes to individual, societal and environmental wellbeing, even as we acknowledge the problems of living in a world that is so “work-centred.” We believe more sustainable approaches to tourism work are possible, which question the primacy of clock time, profit margins and other apparently unassailable characteristics of working life under contemporary capitalism. Slowing down and adapting to the rhythms, sensorial capacities and needs of other species enables further reflection on the purposes of work and working relationships with those around us, foregrounding care and respect and potentially contributing to more decent work experiences and practices.

Third, to date decent work has been used mainly as a touchstone against which harmful practices are highlighted (Timmerman, 2018). Our interspecies analysis has presented a more energising imaginary, in which work is shaped by productive relations but also human and animal rhythms and the ecological context within which they are embedded. This indicates in turn that more sustainable approaches to tourism are those which open up opportunities for people and animals—even those who are comparatively marginalised—to contribute both physical labour and knowledge to the work being undertaken. In this sense, we align with a postgrowth vision in which we work more but better (Mair et al., 2020). An interspecies approach highlights the possibilities in the here and now for different kinds of work that reduce the energy and material throughput of society and enable us to live more satisfying and meaningful lives.

Finally, the decent work agenda has been widely critiqued for failing to address or even acknowledge the structures of late capitalism that deny worker voice, drive down wages and working conditions, and prioritise profit over people. We have demonstrated that a more radical approach may be needed, that advocates for tourism work that is decent but also "meaningful" for people and animals. Our empirical examples illustrate that slowing down, recognising non-human agency and abilities, and working collaboratively and relationally may all help stimulate debate and alternative practices that can transform working lives for the benefit of people and animals working in the global tourism industry. As such, and in contrast to other critical writers (e.g. Gerold et al., 2023), our more hopeful reflection is that aspirations for and examples of decent work not only ameliorate workers' everyday lives, but might also begin to unsettle or even disrupt the underlying structural problems associated with work and the specific morality supporting this often problematic arrangement of human and nonhuman action.

Our conclusions are based on findings from a study undertaken in a particular geographical corner of the world at a specific moment in time. Future research might usefully expand our tentative conclusions to explore, for example, how interspecies decent work unfolds over time and across generations, and in different social, economic, cultural and geographic contexts. Likewise, despite our best intentions, this remains a study that privileges the perspectives of the humans involved. Future research could further explore the animal perspectives intimated here, through interdisciplinary approaches drawing on insights from ethology. This may begin to overcome some of the challenges of multispecies ethnography in terms of trying to take seriously the attempt to consider practices at least partially on the terms of other species (Madden, 2014). Both of these developments would enable the emergence of a truly interspecies understanding of decent work that could contribute to reshaping current practices in and beyond tourism to open up possibilities for more ethical, sustainable and just futures for humans and our animal co-workers.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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