

Racehorses for dinner

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RACEHORSES are ending up on dinner plates overseas as the gruesome trade in horse flesh booms.

Figures obtained by *The Sun-Herald* show 2000 tonnes, or \$8.5million worth, of horse and donkey meat was exported from Australia from January to November last year.

"You can literally be watching a racehorse run at Randwick on the Sunday and the next week it is on its way to a dinner table in Japan," horse welfare advocate Laura Stoikos said.

There are two abattoirs that export horse meat for human consumption - in Queensland and South Australia.

There are also 33 licensed knackereries in Australia that produce horse meat for pet food sold locally.

Of the 17,000 thoroughbreds born last year only about two-thirds will ever make it to the racetrack.

Of those, most suffer injuries or do not run fast enough and only about 1 to 3 per cent make it to top events.

The biggest importers of our horse meat are Japan - where raw horse is a delicacy - Russia, Belgium and France.

America is also another big consumer of our horses and last year imported 20,717 kilograms of meat.

The US has been embroiled in controversy about the slaughter of its own horses for consumption, with celebrities such as Bo Derek joining a campaign to stop horses from being slaughtered for meat in Canada.

Activists say a new ban on horse meat in all US states has led to animals being sold at American auctions, then trucked across the borders to be slaughtered for meat which is exported mostly to Europe.

"Horses are never bred to be eaten. They're not even beasts of burden anymore, those are the old days," Derek said. "They're beautiful animals, used in sport and as companion animals."

As with cattle and other livestock, the most desired horse meat comes from younger animals in good condition and with quality muscle, and that means young thoroughbreds.

Queensland vet Eva Berriman said young horses still in their prime were being killed for human consumption.

She said a lack of records from the selling agents and no proper identification system for horses made it hard to trace where the horses came from.

"But even in the absence of documented figures, the finger must be pointed firmly at the racing industry, which has a very high attrition rate of fine quality, well-muscled horses still in their prime often with no road open to them except to a horsemeat abattoir," Ms Berriman said.

There is only one organised horse welfare group in Australia, Cedar Springs Horses Inc, that rescues thoroughbreds destined for the slaughterhouse.

Miss Stoikos runs the not-for-profit organisation and said the treatment of the doomed horses was horrific. "They are trucked in like cattle in the dead of night," she said.

"They can smell the blood and they are killed one after another and they can see the horse in front of them killed so they know what is going on.

"People get upset when they see a racehorse break down on the track that has to be shot but for every one of those horses there are thousands before it that never make it that far."

Miss Stoikos said the industry needed to be regulated to stop the "backyard breeding" mentality of horse studs.

"At the moment there is no limit to the number of thoroughbred foals that are born," she said.

"There should be a licence system to stop these studs churning out foals that all end up being killed.

"The racing industry really turns its back on what happens to the horses."

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