

# THE NEPALI PACK MULE SADDLE

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Mules are used in the Himalayan foothills to transport loads along narrow trails which ascend and descend with steep slopes. The wooden saddles, which are made locally to a traditional design, are lightweight, about 1 kg in weight, but are also strong. The whole harness comprises the saddle with pad and covers, girth, crupper and breast band.

The load is fastened in two halves separately to horizontal bars between the arches on the left and right sides of the saddle, in such a way that there is a relatively high centre of gravity. This has been termed top-loading. When the load is in place it is difficult to adjust the girth.

The commonest harness related injuries are caused by the rigid side panels of the saddle (80% of mules), the crupper (50-60%) and the saddle arches (40-50%). More mules have sores on the left side of the back than the right due to loading practices. This could be corrected by improved management.

Saddles are available in sizes to suit small, medium and large mules but not infrequently it is found that dimensions of saddles and mules are not well matched. Moreover, mules gain and lose condition in the course of a year depending on the availability of grazing which is influenced by wet and dry seasons. Overall, more injuries occur in animals with low condition scores and also in monsoon conditions when the mules and equipment regularly get soaked.

Already, a modified saddle pad has been introduced and it was well received by the mule owners following trials. An alternate form of crupper or breeching is still required as a new design of the former, which was also put out to trial, did not meet with approval. Without owners' acceptance technological advances have little merit.

Plans are being made to develop a single lightweight saddle which will span the range of sizes of mules in Nepal. In addition, this new one will have side panels with automatic adjustment to vary, within limits, with changes in girth measurement. A prototype has been produced and was demonstrated at the meeting.