

## Letter from Africa

Peta Jones

No news from you recently – although it's entirely possible I've lost it, or Outlook has. Are you still OK? From time to time I'm aware of your presence in correspondence with J.G., but I've been woefully neglectful of all the lines of enquiry I still want to pursue with regard to donkeys, especially regarding their history. I cling to the belief that I still have time for that.

The last update I can find on my files is dated 2017, suggesting that I'm already three years late. But actually it is only about 18 months since the end of 2018, so perhaps I don't need to feel TOO bad that many of my friends will probably have assumed my demise or dementia. As I am ever more frequently reminded, I am somewhat overdue for both. My teeth continue steadily to crumble away, and I can no longer summon a bite. A bark, though, is another matter, especially given that the main reason dogs bark (and donkey bray) is a feeling of some kind of frustration. No shortage of that in my life, as will become clear. So I just cling to the thought of the longevity of my maternal forebears, as I am far from ready to stop, even though irksomely I have had to slow down.

Especially now. The current midwinter days are far too short, and discomfort intrudes into almost everything I do. So I have finally had to acknowledge that it is REALLY no longer possible for me to be 30 years old, and that I must accept or pay for help in almost all things physical, including driving a car and looking after my donkeys. It came slowly over years, I now realize, but the crunch manifested itself about six months ago, when I suffered what was in fact quite a minor fall: toppling sideways off my bathroom stool. Nothing broken or dislocated, but almost every muscle & tendon bruised and strained. All except one or two are now fully recovered, but the really devastating loss has been my sense of balance. Not only dare I not move without a handy prop, but every movement needs to be carefully considered in advance and *very slowly* executed. No sudden turning of a head or even a foot, although luckily my reactions are still fast. I had already taken to walking with a stick out of doors and over rough ground, but this is something altogether different, and seemingly not something that doctors can deal with.

Vertigo now constant and not just afflicting me in high places. I ascribe it to the lazy eye that always required effort for three-dimensional vision and proprioception. Even as a teenager, ballgames were beyond me... although I admit to not trying very hard. Now I'm paying the price, although also resentful that my leg muscles are so prone to stiffness after all those years of dedicated walking. Because I am now obliged to move so slowly, and days are currently so short, I've not been able to get anything like my normal amount of exercise, especially not out of doors. My main exercise consists of strenuous mental and physical routines to keep incontinence at bay, which is hardly compensation for not being able to explore the bush.

I suppose blood pressure could play a role in the balance thing, as dizziness is also felt, although nothing really alarming shows up when mine is measured. Frustration probably doesn't help, and of course the enforced slowdown and easy exhaustion are constant sources. After some glitches and expensive replacements, household power and pump have been working fairly well for a while, but frustrations lurk there as well, Climate change has duly brought increased heat and drought, but too often these have been bizarrely accompanied by heavy cloud cover, not good news for photovoltaics. Even when there is no heavy cloud, there seems to be a constant high-altitude haze which has a slight dimming effect on the sunlight that reaches us. Although the bronze glow in which we now seem to live is certainly very beautiful, it is probably not a very good sign.

I've been observing – and, when I could, recording – the changing effects on the vegetation, and some of it is surprising. There are species that respond very well to heat and drought. Even in my garden, although growth seemed to halt when temperatures rose

above 40°C – which was a lot of the time – thanks to adequate water (somehow achieved), I can now rely on fresh greens most evenings, even though dandelion is champion. Beans are doing OK, but tomatoes still have to prove their worth. In the orchard, the brave old lemon tree bought from the mountain finally gave up the ghost, but other citrus is coming along, as are pomegranates, and the guavas seem unstoppable. Now if only mangoes and avocados can establish, I'd be happy.

No, if anything is increasing my blood pressure, it is probably my frequent yelling at Microsoft. Apoplexy guaranteed. Can they hear my screeches in Seattle? A few years back I signed up for the subscription package that supposedly not only keeps one updated, but covers more than one 'device' (in my case, laptop and PC) and will keep one's data automatically backed up on a cloud called OneDrive. I won't even go into the frustrations presented by the new Canon printer-scanner I had to buy because Windows wouldn't accept the old and perfectly satisfactory Lexmark. Then in the last year Microsoft had difficulty with my new debit card, just about everything offered in Office undergoes unannounced changes from time to time, requiring hours of trial and error to make it work again, if it ever does. And if you ask for help, you simply get offered a number of things for which you have to pay. Apparently what was the Office suite is now a series of 'apps'. I noticed that even my bank has been having similar problems, sending me apologies from time to time for not being able to do something that was easy before. I realize that part of the difficulty is that systems are now having to fit themselves to those evil smart phones as well as all sorts of things besides laptops and PCs, but there seems to be no attempt to achieve simplicity. All those very clever youngsters in Silicon Valley etc. dreaming up further elaborations (and charges for them) without a thought to people who need the software for work and keeping records, not gaming their way through virtual reality and 'social media'.

Having initially failed to rid myself of Facebook, I still find it a major pain, cluttering up my webmail inbox, and seemingly implementing new rules and procedures every time I try (and generally fail) to use it. All the same, I do regard it as potentially useful, not only for exercises like this because too many of my friends have dropped or changed their email addresses, but also because of the growing number of 'groups' that purport to be interested in donkeys. Only it seems that confining themselves to donkeys is largely impossible. I tried myself to establish one for World Donkey Day (8 May), but was largely defeated. Or at least I think I was. I've used LinkedIn largely for sustainable agriculture, because that seemed a little more workable, but even now it is becoming more like Facebook. I get Twitter messages, but have no idea how Twitter has to be handled - let alone the other things that keep getting mentioned on the podcasts to which I am certainly utterly devoted. For my money, especially because they are mostly free, it is podcasts that are the biggest thing since printing was invented. Battles with insomnia are now thankfully in my past.

My younger great-nephew, in his last year of high school, is aiming at IT and being like Elon Musk, so I'm hoping that some day he will find the time to help me understand some of these things and use them more effectively for my purposes. But he'll probably be too busy and given to complications. I know that somewhere on social media there must be an easy way for me to sell the final updated edition of "Donkeys for Development", as well as the small booklet "Comfortable Donkeys" on how to make the simple equipment on which my Powersets are based. Both books are in electronic form, and of course would not have a very big market. I would look for a print publisher for the more general animal-memoir things I am writing at the moment, also on being a vegan in remote rural Africa, and I suppose the first thing I should look for is an agent. Any suggestions?

Having still failed to sell my mother's property (search Limpopo / Makhado / Freshwoods-farm), it is becoming urgent for me to find other sources of income. Not much editing work is coming in, I think because I am increasingly up against people who

can work quicker and more cheaply than I can. Not as thoroughly, of course! But there are not many readers left who would notice.

The plan to find someone to help me set up some donkey tourism along the Sand River has so far come to nothing, mostly because people wholly fail to see what I am trying to achieve – cannot understand why I expect people to walk instead of ride in a cart, etc. Maybe I AM too far behind the times, although I persist in thinking myself ahead. I launched the construction of the ‘Annexe’ designed to accommodate such an assistant, but ran into difficulties with the person who undertook to help me build it. Not only did he pay no attention to my plans, but arbitrarily changed them, obliging me to buy heaps more expensive timber, and still leaving mistakes that it took me and my workers a lot of time and difficulty to correct. There is actually not much more to be done, and I have most of the materials still needed, but now I need some specialist help, or at least help that can understand what I want. A willing neighbour has offered, but will not be available until her husband has finished HIS home improvements, and they are rather vast. Still, without an occupant for my Annexe, I am in no particular hurry, especially as I still have to think of buying a fridge, solar batteries and an inverter to make the place habitable.

It has been a great relief to have those neighbours (4 km away) moving in, replacing their son with whom I had become friendly, but who found work over the mountain and is now living there instead. Mostly I am surrounded by weekenders practising weird and inappropriate methods of farming, so although I hear their traffic at weekends, and smell the pollution they generate, I hardly ever see them. The other neighbours with whom I made friends when I first came, have all sold up and moved away entirely – except for one teaching at the school (20 km away), due to retire in a couple of years. After her brother sold up and she took lodgings at the school, she left a lot of her things in storage with me, the idea being that the Annexe will eventually be hers. However, she’s trying to get her son through university first and her pension may not be enough, so she has ambitions to go and work in the Middle East for a while, where another brother teaches in a school for pilots.

So impatient as I am, I just have to wait, and comfort myself with the beauties of the environment – which are very real, climate change or no. This winter seems unusually cold, but is probably not. I am just feeling it more because I have fewer opportunities for movement. Most mornings the sun on the veranda gets my hands and feet warm enough to function before 9 am. My big old duvet is still doing a splendid job; getting out from under it is the main problem, and then getting washed and dressed with animals shouting for release and for food. After that, sunlight and/or a cocoon of furry blankets. And my doctor tells me that our dry weather is what is keeping the pandemic at bay, even in winter.

Because as a matter of economy I try not to make journeys to town more than once a month, lockdown has hardly affected me at all. Enforcement around here has been very minimal anyway, and I was lucky enough to be on crutches when I had to queue outside supermarkets, so was kindly ushered to the head of queues! I worry a bit about my staff, who seem to be stuffing their accommodation with a growing number of friends and relatives – women, children, the lot – so ‘social distancing’ is clearly not being practised and my water supply is under strain. I wonder how long it will last, but I know that schools are gradually reopening, as are liquor stores and the like. This thing is predicted to have a profound effect on future societies, but I get the feeling it is not going to make much difference here. On the other hand, climate change will accelerate urbanisation, and pandemics hit hardest in cities. The only members of my family who seem committedly urban are my younger niece and her partner, both media people, and their newly adopted toddler son who naturally has yet to express a choice. But even media people, as well as IT characters, can make a niche for themselves away from cities. (The older great nephew wants to be a rural vet, so no worry about him.) It all depends on transport, and we are told that will change. However, as yet no sign around here of any change in the volume of

traffic, pandemic notwithstanding, even though where I live is seriously damaging to cars. I am looking forward to shopping-by-drone. If nothing else, it will be no more disturbing than and also make a change from hunting-by-helicopter which seems to have become a favourite among the game farms around here. The plans for a high-pollutin' industrial zone astride the big national road about 30 km from here seem at least to be fading away, no doubt because it has become apparent that there will be no water for it, Kariba Dam being too far.

Being equipped to apply an archaeological if not an outright geological perspective to planetary changes, and also knowing that I shan't be around to suffer the worst adaptations, does make it all less stressful for me. And I have done what I could not to waste anything, to recycle as much as I can, and to use the minimum of water and energy in my daily living, making my footprint lighter than most. I try to convince people that there is nothing difficult or uncomfortable about it, and can even be done in cities, but being regarded as an eccentric doesn't help. I saw my camping-with-donkeys tourism plan as an opportunity for doling out some environmental education, but without that coming to fruition, not much planet-saving is possible for me. Of course the *planet* will survive well enough as long as the sun does; it is humanity in its present form which will probably not, along with a number of other species. All part of a Greater Plan ? Not for us to know. But I'll be around a while longer, observing! Here's wishing the same for you.

Cheers,

P.

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**The author adds the following note:**

Meanwhile I am trying to fathom how to sell online the pdf version of my 'Donkeys for Development', now fully updated, especially written for remote and resource-poor people who rely on their donkeys, as well as a small workshop manual for making proper low-cost hitching and harnessing for donkeys. All fully edited and laid out, with plenty of illustrations. I'd appreciate suggestions.

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