

Beyond Welfare: The Emergence of a Spatial License to Operate

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Over the past decade, the discipline of equitation science has played an important role in helping the equine industry take greater ownership of its responsibilities in response to changing societal expectations. As ethical and moral perspectives surrounding animal use have continued to evolve, the equine sector has increasingly come under scrutiny regarding how horses are trained, managed, and kept [1]. Rather than emerging in isolation, these discussions reflect wider societal changes in how animal use, welfare, and ethical responsibility are understood and evaluated [2]. At the same time, this changing landscape has also created momentum for reflection and innovation within the equine industry itself. While the sector has been required to reassess certain practices and long-held assumptions within the context of the social license to operate [3], this process has also driven forward positive developments and new ways of thinking. As discussed in our previous editorial [4], the growing emphasis on positive welfare and on adding value to horses' lives represents an important and encouraging step forward, even if there remains considerable work to be done.

An additional consequence of this broader shift has been a growing awareness that the equine sector does not exist in isolation from the rest of society. As such, it does not stand apart from the wider challenges associated with climate change, biodiversity loss, geopolitical instability, increasing global populations, and the growing demand for finite resources. As pressure on land continues to increase through demands for housing, energy production, infrastructure, recreation, food production, and nature conservation, sectors competing for land are increasingly required to demonstrate their broader societal value and contribution [5]. This evolution within society at large has started to generate a second, more consequential shift: one that situates the horse not merely within the horse–human dyad, but within broader socio-ecological systems that will ultimately determine the sustainability of equestrianism, and perhaps even the equine industry itself. As societal expectations around the use of natural resources intensify, the field is moving beyond questions of how horses are trained or managed toward more fundamental questions of how their presence is justified within shared landscapes.

1. Positioning Equine Systems Within Multifunctional Landscapes

A growing body of work is positioning equine systems within multifunctional landscapes, treating equine holdings as socio-ecological units where animal welfare, human well-being, and environmental processes intersect [6,7]. Empirical studies indicate that equine holdings can contribute meaningfully to landscape structure and biodiversity: large-scale survey work suggests that landscape features such as hedgerows, tree lines, and buffer strips are already present on many properties and can align with broader ecological targets [8]. Both owner-focused and behavioral research demonstrate that these features are not only ecologically relevant, but also meaningful within the context of equine welfare and enrichment, with horses actively using them for shelter, activity, and rest, while exhibiting strong, individualized preferences shaped by interactions between environmental conditions and individual identity [9,10]. This convergence is conceptually significant, suggesting that ecological function and animal welfare may be mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives when approached through intentional design. An increasing number of horse owners are highly motivated to adopt sustainable practices, recognizing the win-win of managing land in a way that aligns with their horses' innate needs [6,11,12]. However, implementation remains uneven: behavioral analyses using frameworks such as COM-B indicate that structural barriers, including land tenure insecurity, limited financial incentives, labor constraints, and regulatory ambiguity, persist [6,12]. Integrating ecological measures into existing management goals, rather than positioning them as additional requirements, will be essential for translating research insights into practice.

2. Toward a Spatial License to Operate

These converging strands point toward a fundamental reorientation of equitation science: from isolated measurement toward integrated systems thinking, in which welfare, behavior, environment, and human decision-making are understood as interdependent.

This editorial argues that equitation science is beginning to coalesce around what might be termed a spatial license to operate, i.e., the extent to which equine systems are perceived as legitimate, valuable, and sustainable within the environments they occupy, warranting their retention over competing land uses. Within this context, the notion of a spatial license to operate may offer a potentially useful conceptual framework. Unlike the social license, which focuses on public acceptance, a spatial license emphasizes the legitimacy of equine systems within the physical landscapes they occupy, asking not only whether horse use is socially acceptable, but whether it contributes meaningfully to ecological function, landscape quality, and broader societal or environmental goals.

Sensor technologies can now provide detailed, individual-level welfare data; AI systems can scale behavioral observation; citizen science approaches can map landscape-level contributions; and behavioral frameworks can explain adoption barriers. What remains underdeveloped is the integration of these data streams into governance: how welfare metrics inform regulation, how biodiversity contributions are recognized in policy frameworks, and how equine systems are positioned within broader land-use debates. Bridging this gap will require interdisciplinary collaboration and a willingness to engage with policymakers, planners, and the public on terms that extend well beyond traditional equestrian discourse.

More recently, *IJES* has begun to feature research that explicitly connects equine welfare to environmental and spatial considerations. A socio-spatial analysis of equine yards, for example, examines how yard owners in Germany and the Netherlands balance biodiversity, equine welfare, and operational needs through landscape design [13]. This work proposes preliminary guidelines that integrate community engagement, sustainable business practices, and ecological function, precisely the kind of synthesis required to operationalize a spatial license to operate. Similarly, research on landscape feature selection by sport horses [10] demonstrates that horses exhibit measurable, individualized preferences for specific environmental elements, with behavior shaped by weather, time of day, and individual identity. Such findings suggest that welfare-informed landscape design is not only possible but empirically tractable.

By maintaining research quality and integrity while offering a vehicle for emerging, preliminary, and interdisciplinary work, *IJES* is well positioned to support the field's transition from measurement to meaning. The journal's explicit focus on the horse-human-environment nexus reflects an understanding that sustainability in equestrianism cannot be achieved through an animal-centric lens alone but requires engagement with the lived experiences of the people involved and the landscapes they share. As equitation science continues to evolve, *IJES* can play a catalytic role in encouraging work that connects welfare assessment to environmental design, technological innovation to ethical reflection, and empirical findings to broader societal questions.

As the past decade has shown, the equine sector cannot permit itself to remain isolated. Its future lies in its capacity to articulate how horses, humans, and landscapes interact and how these interactions can be shaped in ways that are not only effective, but also defensible within a changing world.

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