

PRESS RELEASE from The Donkey Sanctuary, 12 May 2011

It is with deep sorrow that international animal welfare charity The Donkey Sanctuary, and its sister charity the Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys, today announces the death of the charities' founder, Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE.

Dr Svendsen founded the charity in 1969 out of her deep love and compassion for abused, neglected and abandoned donkeys everywhere, after finding seven donkeys in a terribly poor state crammed in a small pen at Exeter market. She tried to buy the donkey in the worst condition, without success, and from that moment on, decided that she would dedicate her life to saving donkeys in distress. Since that day over 40 years ago, through her tireless devotion and endeavour, The Donkey Sanctuary has given over 14,500 donkeys and mules in need lifelong care and love in UK, Ireland and mainland Europe. Dr Svendsen's passionate leadership also led to the development of the charity's work overseas, helping donkeys working in desperate conditions in some of the most impoverished communities on the planet.

The Donkey Sanctuary's Chief Executive said:

"The loss of Dr Svendsen will be felt deeply by her staff who loved her dearly, as well as Donkey Sanctuary supporters all over the world. Her son Paul and granddaughter Dawn remain deeply involved with The Donkey Sanctuary's work and our heart goes out to the family at this devastating time. The charity that Dr Svendsen built from nothing to the international organisation it is today, will continue its work in her memory, holding fast to her vision of a world in which every donkey and mule receives the care and respect it so needs."

Dr Svendsen's influence in animal welfare in the UK and far beyond over the past four decades has been vast. She was awarded the MBE in 1980 and an Honorary Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery in 1992 from the University of Glasgow. In 2001 she was awarded the Lord Erskine Award by the RSPCA, in recognition of her important contribution to the field of animal welfare, particularly in donkey rescue. And in 2009 she was awarded the Degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Edinburgh in recognition of decades of pioneering work in the care and welfare of donkeys. It also recognised her founding one of the most successful animal charities in the world, a point of reference and centre of excellence for vets worldwide. Dr Svendsen was a prolific author and she also played a key role in setting up the Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) which acts in an advisory capacity towards future animal welfare legislation.

In addition to her donkey welfare work, Dr Svendsen was a passionate advocate for riding therapy for children with special needs. She established The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys, a charity giving children with special needs the opportunity to have contact with and ride donkeys at six purpose-built centres throughout the UK, most recently near Belfast which opened its doors just a few days ago.

Dr Svendsen's impact on the lives of thousands of children assisted by riding therapy, as well as millions of donkeys and the communities that rely on them for their own survival, cannot be measured. She leaves behind a family of four children, eight grandchildren, two great grandchildren and many, many friends and admirers.

Dr Svendsen died peacefully on Wednesday 11th May 2011 after a stroke, with family and her lifelong friend June Evers by her bedside. She was 81 years old.