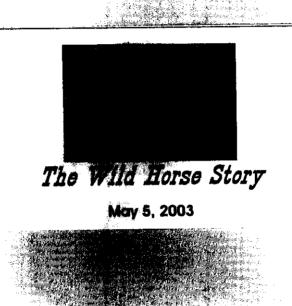
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The Wild Horse Story

Provided by: Betty Kelly, M.D.

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Wild Horses: the Feral Animal Label

by Nancy Whitaker

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Wild, free-roaming horses on the public lands of the West are protected by a federal law that recognizes their wildlife status and requires they be managed as an integral part of the natural system. They are not feral animals; they are not estrays. By law and by nature they are wildlife.

It is true that, like dolphins, the horse has a unique affinity for humans. This affinity no doubt facilitated their original capture and domestication in ancient times. From earliest times the horse has played a significant role in the history of Mankind. Over the centuries it has become incorporated into our culture and our minds in a way that we now disconnect it totally from the world of deer, elk, moose, bears, fox, coyote, and bobcat. Like the elephant in other cultures, horses are so much a part of our world, we assume ownership. But like the elephant, used for centuries in Southeast Asia and India, our domestic horses have wild cousins that exist in their natural habitat. Simply because Man has captured and domesticated elephants, few would label elephants in the wild as feral animals. They are wildlife.

Today, it is difficult for those closest to domestic horses, who pride themselves on their intimate knowledge of horses and their total domination over their own horse, to grasp the fact that wild horses live in their native habitat in America today.

When the Spanish brought the horse to the New World in 1519, which is the earliest written record, those that strayed went forth into a physical environment in which the horse evolved as a species over the course of some 60 million years. That evolution is documented by archeologists and paleontologists based on bone findings. Their mysterious disappearance some 8,000-10,000 years ago is not explained by any known phenomena other than the coincidental arrival of humans on this continent. The plausible explanation for the lack of bones after 8,000 AD is that Man hunted them to extinction. On the other hand, perhaps archeologists simply haven't found later bones. We do know for sure that the Spanish did not introduce the horse to North America. They re-introduced it. In geological time, 8,000 years compared with 60 million is a spit in the ocean. Their niche in the scheme of things had not closed. When those reintroduced horses strayed, it was into a landscape little changed in the interim of their absence. They fit the land, and the land fit them. They displaced no other species but fit as a grazer pruning the grasses and distributing undigested seeds, following the greenup in spring and the seed drop/dormancy period of the cold months. On the Great Plains they migrated north and south, in other terrain they traveled up the mountains in spring and down to the bench lands and valleys during the cold. The wild horse is native to North America, living in its native habitat. It is not an exotic. It is not a feral animal.

No one knows how many generations it took for the estrays of the 1500's to respond to their instinctive behaviors, natural social organization, and species survival mechanisms to become fully functional. We do know the transition from domesticated

estray to self-sufficient wildlife, existing in dynamic, reciprocal and mutually beneficial interaction with their external environment, occurred before the Plains Indians captured and domesticated wild horses some 400 years ago. Those remaining uncaptured were no less wild. It's hard for us today to imagine how much land and how few human occupants existed before 1830. It's hard to imagine that the horse was here when early humans crossed the land bridge into North America. In fact, the horse went the other way into Asia and Europe some ten million years before humans crossed it and a hundred million after the extinction of dinosaurs.

So with their native species-wildlife status so clearly documented, why do biologists and others refer to wild horses as feral animals today? The answer is politics, which is to say self-serving interests who manage to out-shout others in the arena of ruling authority and decision-making power in America today.

Unknown to many, there is a range war going on today over the control and ownership of the public domain lands which stretch, undeveloped and mostly unoccupied by humans, across the western states. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administers some 270 million acres. The Forest Service has jurisdiction over more than 100 additional million. Today, some 20,000 ranchers have the exclusive privilege of grazing their livestock on these millions of acres, which are held in trust for the good of all in perpetuity by the federal government. Ranchers and land developers hate the very idea of land held by the federal government for the public good and not in private hands as private property and individual wealth which equates to ruling power. Wild, free-roaming horses are at the very heart of this range war.

The federal wild horse protection law focuses the attention and concern of "outsiders" on these public lands, where these 20,000 individuals (ranchers), with their exclusive and preferential use of the land, hold sway as if the public domain is their own private domain. As long as no one else muzzles in, it is so because they make it so. "Feral horse" is their propaganda slogan put forth to undermine the protection law.

The ecological language of the wild horse and burro protection law implements the directives in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that requires the land agencies manage the land from an ecological perspective – protecting the ecosystem by regulating and controlling human use (e.g. domestic livestock grazing). "Get government off our backs" and "too much federal regulation" originates with the western livestock interests and spreads to sympathetic ears. Since no one over the age of twelve likes being told what to do and how to do it, these slogans hit home and ring true when applied to their own lives.

For the public land rancher, that ecological language means his cows must leave half the annual growth on the vegetation for the purpose of providing watershed, soil stability/composition, wildlife habitat and fisheries for the broadest diversity of wildlife, and the regeneration of the vegetative plant species. Specifically, it means no more overstocking the land and grazing the grass to stubble. In other words, reduce the number of cows, downsize your operation, and cut your income so "outsiders" can hike, camp, explore and take over this domain you use as if it were your own. This new management approach is a far cry from the old Grazing Service Management Program in which all of the annual growth was allocated as forage for livestock. The ranchers are

not willing to allow reductions in their historical forage allocations. That is the crux of today's range war.

The BLM, which is totally controlled by livestock interests through coercion and intimidation, including life threats to field staff and bombs placed in BLM and FS offices, is not willing to make those reductions for fear of more reprisals and retribution by the livestock interests. The BLM functions exactly like a battered wife in collusion with her abusive and domineering husband. Because wild horses are a grazing species, they are the easy scapegoat to blame for overgrazing. Together with the ranchers they say: "It's not cows damaging the land, it's those damn horses. Feral horses. Most of them escaped from rancher Jones' corral down the road a piece. Get rid of them feral horses." And so they do.

The wild horse law also prescribes a wildlife management approach that is the alternative to the hunter-driven "set a number and cull" traditional game management practice. It requires a scientific basis for wildlife management that fits the ecological management approach. The hunters are not about to allow a change to a management program that produces game for them to shoot.

The wild horse law specifically states that wildlife agencies must protect the ecological balance (e.g., interdependencies) among wildlife species threatened with extinction as the result of human activity. Now the ranchers have to respond because it's those predators that take out their newborn lambs and calves, and they've got to be exterminated if a man's gonna make a decent living; and the farmers who can't run a straight plow because of the prairie dogs, or raise chickens because of the fox and coyote raiding their yards agree. They say all the varmints gotta go. A federal wildlife law that requires the federal agencies show that an overpopulation exists in a given area by monitoring the impact of that population on the current condition of the ecosystem is in direct conflict with the idea that the government's job is to serve the farmer and rancher, not controlling them to serve the wildlife. Now the ranchers and their like-minded cohorts are really riled. Their livelihood and lifestyle is at stake.

The law restricts the removal of wild horses to only the number of excess needed to restore the thriving natural ecological balance. The national policy stated in the law is to remove wild horses only when they pose a threat to themselves, their habitat, or other rangeland values. To the ranchers, this kind of thinking is down right un-American. The Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970's-80's was born. This evolved to the Wise-Use Movement of the 1990's. "Feral horse" tops the list of their war slogans.

It is absolutely critical that those citizens who want to protect wild horses understand these statutory restrictions on removing wild horses from their identified habitat areas. The law is on your side, but it is useless if you don't know what it says. The law requires BLM to manage these identified habitat areas "principally but not necessarily exclusively" for the protection of wild horses and/or burros under multipleuse principles. This is the clincher for the ranchers. Horse lovers, who are unable to recognize the wild horse as a wildlife species existing in its native habitat on YOUR public lands, simply re-enforce the rancher's feral horse label in their war against the wild horse.

That label and the failure to know what the law says allow the government to rationalize and justify the destruction of the remaining bands despite the protection law. There are no "feral horses" on the public lands, but there is a very powerful political label touted by the politically astute and powerful western livestock interests.

The western livestock interests have always been intensely political. They know exactly how to use political power to their own advantage at the county, state and federal level. Their lobbying groups, the cattleman and woolgrowers organizations, network the rural west rallying the grassroots to their cause. Now in conjunction with states' rights militia groups as well as mining, timbering, and gas/oil exploiters and profiteers, they are even more powerful. They know how to manipulate and control the federal land agencies.

The Clinton Administration [now the Bush Administration] has opted to trade off wild horses to appease and placate this faction of self-serving rebel ranchers and militant westerners. The only reason they get away with it is because the general public does not understand what the law says, and the media doesn't inform them.

Wild horse round-ups today are in abject violation of federal laws and total disregard of duly established procedures. The BLM is racing to take the wild horse populations down to non-viable numbers [NV Assemblyman John Carpenter recently said during testimony on March 20, 2001 that the numbers of wild horses in Nevada are nearing the desired level – AML] in an eradication program that only Congress can stop. They have already totally eliminated wild horses from well over 100 of the 303 identified habitat areas and have already reduced most in the remaining areas to non-viable herds. The only means Congress has of stopping illegal round-ups, short of repealing the law, which is the goal of the ranchers, is through Appropriations: No funds for round-ups until BLM puts the law back in their management program is the slogan of wild horse advocates. (Under current Bush administration, BLM suddenly has all the money needed to continually capture and remove wild horses/burros to non-viable populations by 2005.) However, Congress will not act unless the public outcry from across the country is so overwhelming that is overrides the power of the western Senators, who now chair the relevant committees.

The feral horse advocates are winning their war; their political slogan works. BLM has not reduced their forage allocation since the 1960's—20, 000 welfare ranchers, with exclusive preferential privilege subsidized by your taxes on your land, have held the entire nation at bay for over thirty years. They don't see themselves as freeloaders unwilling to share but as fighting a holy war in the name of lifestyle and livelihood with an all or nothing outcome. •

Are Wild Horses Exotic or Native? Some Current Thoughts -2003

The argument that the modern horse is "exotic" is one based on (1) scientific methodologies that are out of date, and (2) policy based on these old methodologies and, like some mythology, becoming entrenched.

The precise argument for *Equus caballus* (or the caballoid horse) being exotic is that it was not here when horses disappeared 10-12 thousand years ago and that the horse brought back by the Spanish was a different "species".

The most recent horse in North America, prior to the disappearance of horses, according to fossil records, was Equus lambei. However, according to mitochondrial DNA analysis, E. lambei and E. caballus are genetically identical (not surprising, in that they collectively represent the caballoid horse). More to the point, there is no evidence at all for the origin of E. caballus anywhere except North America and the date for its origin on this continent is set at approximately 1.6 million years ago. This is all set forth in Forsten, A. 1992. Mitochondrial-DNA timetable and the evolution of Equus: comparison of molecular and paleontological evidence. Ann. Zool Fennici 28: 301-309. Ann Forsten is considered to be one of only a handful of scientists who have worked out the evolution of Equus, along with Ollie Ryder at the San Diego Zoo.

The real issue here is that while mitochondrial DNA evidence makes it clear that the modern horse was here long before 10,000-12,000 years ago, there are those who cling to the old paleontological data, perhaps because they don't understand the power of modern molecular biology with regard to sorting out evolution. This same technology has rewritten the evolutionary picture of humans and many other taxa and cannot be simply disregarded because one doesn't understand it or because it refutes books on evolution written 50 years ago.

In a second paper, by Carles Vila (also from the same Swedish research group - Department of Evolutionary Biology at Uppsala University) the origin of domestic horse lineages was shown to be extremely widespread over time and geography and also support the existence of the caballoid horse in North America before their disappearance. (Vila et al. 2001. Widespread origins of domestic horse lineages. Science 291:474-477).

Thus, the horse of the Americas, *Equus caballus*, on the basis of science, must be considered only as a reintroduced native wildlife species.

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