

The Wild Horse Dilemma: Background, Prospective, and Action

Charlie Fisher

Effective RANGE MANAGEMENT has been my life-long commitment. My livelihood has come from striving to improve the quality of rangelands. But I am also a man who has ridden the range with the wild horses, who has marveled at their freedom, and who has been thrilled by their existence.

Cortez introduced horses to the North American continent in about 1520. As the story is told, he brought 16 Spanish Barb horses to Mexico, more came later. Some of them were stolen by the Indians, escaped, or were released. Horses were first sighted in about 1600 in what is now known as the United States. Because man introduced horses to this continent but did not introduce their natural predators, it became man's responsibility to manage them. The different attempts of management so far have been incomplete and unsuccessful. What began as the status symbol-necessity governed management by the Indians and pioneers, evolved to the economic-recreation type of management by the ranchers and mustangers, and has become an expensive and restrictive form of management under the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act.

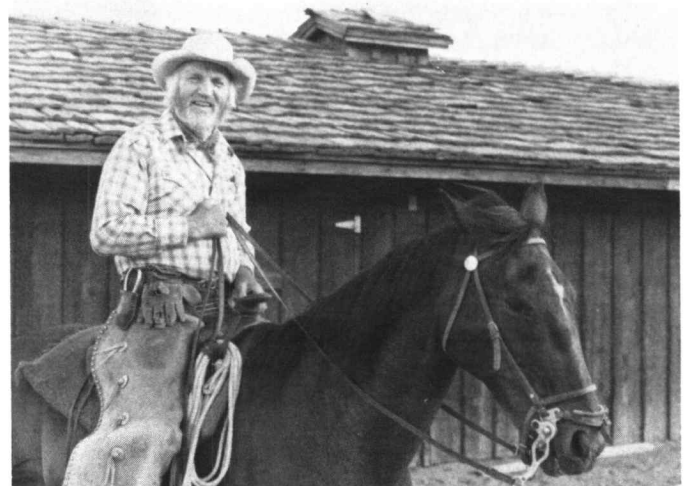
From 1600 to 1900 wild horses were utilized primarily by Indians and pioneers and became part of our national heritage. With no natural predators and with an abundance of feed, the wild horse population prospered. The herds grew and spread throughout the West until millions roamed the range. Many ranges were seriously overgrazed. When the open ranges were cultivated, the wild horse was pushed to the high rough country and areas not suitable for agriculture. The decrease in range and the increase in wild horse numbers made the competition for the remaining forage and water critical.

The next form of control by man was an individualized and inconsistent type administered by the ranchers. Ranch economics and need played major roles in this form of management. Ranchers turned out good stallions to upbreed the herds and had roundups to keep the populations in balance with forage available. The captured horses with good conformation were used for cow ponies and work horses, and the poor quality animals were sold for chicken or pet food. The roundups provided winter sport for the buckaroos and gave them some spending money when other operations on the ranch were in a slack period. For the most part the roundups were humane. There were unfortunately a few *greedy* and *vicious* people that grossly abused this situation. There were growing numbers of reports and testimonies of severely cruel and inhumane treatment of the wild horses. Truck loads of maimed, wounded, suffering, and dying horses were

delivered to slaughterhouses leaving trails of blood and echoes of terrorized screams. Horses were shot and wounded from airplanes, and left on the desert to suffer slow and agonizing deaths. These incidents were the rare exception rather than the rule. Reports and observations of these types of cruelty spurred Velma Johnston, "Wildhorse Annie," into action.

Annie took the plight of the wild horse to the people, especially grade school kids. She convinced them the "mustangs" were fast disappearing from the American scene, and they were being seriously mistreated. In 1959 she was successful in getting a law passed that made it illegal to chase and capture wild horses with any type of motorized vehicle. Then in 1971 the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act passed. This Act placed the wild horse and burro under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. The Act was effective in reducing the incidence of abuse, but created some new and serious problems for the wild horse. The people that do the wild horse the most harm are those that love them and think they are helping. Some people are victims of misused sentimentalism and misinformation. Some of the most publicized misconceptions with rebuttal statements are listed in the following paragraphs:

Misconception #1: "All wild horses are descendants of the original mustang, well contoured, majestic symbols of our national heritage." Any resemblance of the wild horse of today and the original mustang is purely coincidental. The wild horse of today is a cross between everything from a Percheron to a Shetland pony. Many of them are offsprings of rejects, turned out because the owners did not want to feed them. There are some horses, however, that are pretty



Charlie on his horse Napoleon getting ready to chase wild horses. (Photo by Sydney McBride).

About the Author: Charlie Fisher for many years was Range Conservationist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Nevada. After retirement he worked as Range Consultant for Resource Concepts, Inc. in Carson City, Nev. He can back up his words and ideas on wild horses with field experience, photographs and documentation.

well put together. Before the Act was passed the ranchers would turn out good stallions in hopes of getting good cow horses from their stallions' breeding success. This practice was stopped when the Act prohibited capture and utilization of the wild horse. It was no longer feasible, economical, or logical for ranchers to upbreed the herds, and the quality of the wild horse population is slowly going downhill.

Misconception #2: "Wild horses are on the verge of extinction." In 1971 Wildhorse Annie used the low figure of 17,000 head to show they were becoming scarce. Just 10 years later BLM estimated the population in excess of 45,000. Some range specialists and many others say that it is closer to 70,000. The numbers are much greater today. In 1981 BLM raised the adoption fee to \$200.00 causing the adoption centers to fill up, so BLM quit rounding up horses. This meant for a further buildup of horses on an already overpopulated range, causing serious deterioration of ranges in some areas. The adoption fee has been lowered to \$125.00. This has helped some.

Misconception #3. "Wild horse roundups are horribly inhumane and cruel." I have been on many roundups, both the modern ones utilizing helicopters and traps and the old method of roping and hogtying. Today's methods supervised by BLM or the Forest Service are as humane as most cattle roundups. Very few animals get hurt. The roundups are far more pleasant to witness than to watch a horse starve to death on an overgrazed range.

Misconception #4. "The public land, where the horses run, is vast and lush enough to support unlimited numbers of wild horses." A lot of the public land is semi-desert. In some areas the wild horses are destroying portions of valuable rangelands and affecting numerous other species that depend on the range for survival, including wildlife and domestic livestock. Some Americans do not appreciate the fact that the land in question is not abundant in water or vegetation. It is not tolerant to abuse or overuse. It is extremely fragile, especially in Nevada where the lion's share of wild horses roam. It takes decades to restore a delicate desert or semi-desert ecosystem once it has been overgrazed. Before the Act was passed, on most public rangelands, there was no allocation for wild horses; therefore, the horses were essentially in trespass. Environmental variables have to be considered for realistic management of all lands.

I personally knew "Wildhorse Annie." She was a grand person and meant well. She got a little carried away with sentimentalism and dramatics to get the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act passed. She was a dedicated conservationist but did not anticipate the overpopulation now witnessed on some of the public ranges.

The Act served the immediate purpose of opening humane avenues through which wild horses and burros were adopted. For the first few years the adoption program did not go over too well because the adopter did not get title. The Act was amended so a person could adopt 4 head per year and after a year get title to the animals. The adoption fee was low, and all horses rounded up were adopted. The program seemed, for the most part, to be working fine.

The past 12 years have exposed several new abuses and some serious limitations. The most recent publicized abuse involved the man who had 140 head of legally adopted horses under his control. He had powers of attorney from enough people to get the horses. He had the horses in a pasture without enough feed; they were starving. At first glance the incident could be written off as an inhumane act



Capturing wild horses by helicopter from Public land between Fernley and Silver Springs, Nev. (BLM photo by Steve Weiss).

of a twisted mind, but a closer look shows the incident to have a profound message.

The incident is simply a scaled down, concentrated, and speeded up version of what could potentially happen on some of our ranges today. The formula is the same: Too many horses plus not enough forage equals starvation of the animals and destruction of the range. The big differences between them are: on rangelands the area is larger, the number of horses is greater, the time suffering of starvation is longer, and the carcasses are utilized by animals of the wild. There are no TV anchor persons or newspaper reporters on the range to even give the animals the honor of dying for a cause. They die slowly, alone and unnoticed. What this individual did, probably out of greed and stupidity, the Act, AS IT NOW STANDS, could force the land management agencies to do—leave too many horses on the range with not enough forage.

Financial restrictions and requirements of the Act have placed unrealistic limitations on management appropriations and cost effectiveness. The cost of capturing, transporting, holding, and adopting the horses has skyrocketed due in part to elements imposed by the Act and excess administration costs. Some of the details of the Act have made the captured and unadopted wild horses expensive and useless in life, as well as expensive and wasteful in death—even their carcasses cannot be utilized as the Act now stands. Recognition of these and other limitations and shortcomings have led to the development of amendments to Act.

I am very much in favor of the Amendment presently before Congress for the following reasons: (1) It would allow direct sale of excess horses and burros for which foster homes cannot be found. (2) It would give management agencies tools to do a better job of managing the wild horses and burros. (3) It reduces the possibility of individuals adopting animals for the purpose of commercial gain. (4) It deters unscrupulous people from illegal sales and inhumane treatment of wild horses and burros. (5) It eliminates a lot of government red tape and paperwork for adopters to obtain title. *It would not change the number of horses that die, just the way they die!*

And in speaking of the way they die, it would be much more humane and resourceful to destroy them in their native habitat, thus making carrion available for other wildlife such as

eagles. This would be in case they could not be sold.

The horses and rangelands need the amendments. PLEASE, learn all you can of the facts of the wild horse, its environment, and their interrelationship. Consider the long term effects of overpopulation and mismanagement. Seek to

understand the delicate balance between land and beast. Base your decision on facts and logic, not sentimentalism and misinformation. Have an open mind, use insight into the total picture and foresight into the future. Then if you agree write your lawmaker in favor of the amendments. ●

ANTHROPOMORPHISM: You should know what it is

Cliff Hamilton

The dictionary defines anthropomorphism as the "ascribing of human characteristics to nonhuman things." Humans have probably been doing this as long as there has been a developed form of communication. Film animation and development of cartoons, however, caused a real boom in anthropomorphism. Disney was the first to extensively portray all kinds of wildlife with human characteristics.

The three little pigs walked on their hind legs, danced and sang in the street and built human-style houses. The big bad wolf also walked upright in human fashion. So did Mickey Mouse, Yogi Bear and the rest of the cartoon gang. We regularly see or read material portraying animals in human terms with feelings such as love, anger, disappointment and desire. Animals are seen to converse among themselves, to work at jobs such as policemen or firemen, and to socialize in various manners.

Anthropomorphic treatment of animals makes much more appealing cartoon material and printed stories. It certainly sells more copies, too, but there are other prices that society pays for such seemingly harmless portrayals. As the urbanization of this country continues, huge portions of our population have increasingly less contact with wildlife and the natural world. To many people, these cuddly bears, crafty foxes and wise old owls are more real than the animal itself.

Anthropomorphic approaches to wildlife constitute little more than false advertising. The resulting impressions of animals as somehow "human" have led to some very ecologically unsound actions both legislative and legal. Court actions and legislation aimed at "saving all the animals" are a familiar and distressing result of a nation long fed a diet of anthropomorphic creatures. Protectionist groups regularly clash with wildlife managers over the need to scientifically manage some wild population. Many of these groups are made up of and financed by well-meaning urbanites who have little knowledge of the real nature of nature.

Wildlife is another form of life with which we share this

The above reprint from *Oregon Wildlife*, December 1981, was contributed by E. William Anderson, Certified Range Management Consultant, Lake Oswego, Ore.

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Comment from Anderson: This article is highly appropriate information for all resource workers because it deals with a special kind of psychology that is evident in non-hunters, preservationist, wildlife defenders, and others who make up a strong segment of the group of environmental extremists we have to deal with today.

planet. Wild creatures are not human and have few human characteristics beyond the basic instincts and requirements to sustain life. Their portrayal as being otherwise is more than harmless "kid" stuff. One would reason that any adult would clearly accept that animals do not dress up in human clothes, "talk" among themselves, or apply logic and reason to their daily activities. In view of the pressures on wildlife programs by misguided citizens it would appear that such is not necessarily the case.

This letter to the editor of the *Courier* (Prescott, Ariz.) is along the same lines.

Teach both sides of issue

EDITOR:

I read with interest the letters from the 9-year-olds regarding kind treatment of their pets and animals sponsored by the Yavapai Humane Society in the May 8 issue.

The letter that attracted my attention is the one declaring that animals have the same rights as people. That concerns me that a youngster that age would initiate that philosophy without being prompted or at least it being suggested to him.

What lies behind the fundamental issue here is a typical case of animal protection by the public whether they be dogs, cats, cows, lambs or rabbits. Considerable attention has been given by the press to the animal welfare and animal rights movements.

The animal welfare movement is not as negative toward animal livestock production as the animal rights groups. "Animal Welfare" recognizes the need for livestock production, but has considerable problems with intensive management systems that may produce stress in the animal. Animal rights is a moral and philosophical belief that all animals have an inherent right to the "pursuit of happiness."

That there are questionable practices in animal production is not to be disputed, but we must try to correct them honestly. Companion animals do serve a very worthwhile function in improving the quality of life for a large segment of the population. Where we run into problems is when we transfer our affections unintentionally to the meat animal production field. The image of a poor calf or lamb going to slaughter sends chills up the spine of many.

What I am saying is, to teach the youngsters to be kind to animals, but also teach them where beef steak and fried chicken comes from.—**Carlton L. Camp**, Yavapai County Ag. Extension Agent