

The mustang controversy

The emotion-charged debate over saving the wild horses of the West suffers from lack of ecological data

by Richard H. Gilluly

To most of the public, environmentalism means cleaning up the air and water in large urban areas. Be this as it may, one of the old-fashioned conservation causes is catching fire in the United States today, and it is supported not only by fashionable cliques that traditionally have supported such causes but also by large numbers of ordinary citizens. Both groups have identified the cause with high emotional values such as freedom and the "preservation of the American heritage."

The cause is the preservation of the mustang, the "wild" horse of the West, threatened now with extinction because it allegedly competes with other values, either ecological or economic. After numerous articles in national magazines, there is now legislation in Congress to save the mustangs, and the likelihood is it will pass.

The mustang dispute is perhaps the most beclouded of all environmental issues today, primarily because of the intense emotionalism it engenders. There is no doubt that those who would eliminate—or reduce the numbers of—the wild horses are armed with little factual information; there is some evidence, in fact, that the horses are not in competition with the livestock or wildlife values espoused by them. On the other side, however, the horse advocates are sometimes hard put to come up with solid arguments for preservation of the mustangs, their mainstay being intense emotional fervor.

The problem would be a simple one if the horses were native to North America. But they are not; some of them are descendants or partial descendants of the Andalusian and Barb horses brought to the New World by the Conquistadores. But others—and this is a fact the horse lovers tend to pass over quickly—are descendants of plow horses that escaped from early homesteads and ranches. If the horses

were a native species, they could be protected under the Endangered Species Act. In fact, however, the horses are not "wild" but "feral," descendants of once-domesticated animals. Thus there is no provision in the law for their protection.

The horse, ironically, first evolved in North America. The four-toed *Eohippus* first appeared in what is now the western United States some 50 million years ago. *Eohippus* then evolved, through three-toed and two-toed species, into *Equus caballus*, the modern horse. But some 8,500 years ago, for reasons not yet fully understood, the horse became extinct in North America. Some of its numbers, however, had managed to get to the Eurasian land mass, perhaps by crossing the land bridge that connected North America with Siberia. It was apparently in Eurasia that the horse was first domesticated. Then when the early Spanish explorers came to America, they brought the animal back with them.

Horses escaped from the Conquistadores, and this time they thrived. By the 1870's there were 3.5 million of them running wild in the Western states. As the land began to be used, however, the wild horses became unpopular, especially with cattlemen, who claimed the animals competed with livestock for forage, and with wildlife interests who said horse competition reduced the numbers of wildlife.

Thus the horse had no allies, and thousands were rounded up by entrepreneurs who sold them to manufacturers of dog and cat food. Most of the remaining horses are on public lands, and the Bureau of Land Management, caretaker of these lands, estimates there are now about 17,000 of the horses in 10 Western states. Although they now enjoy some protection, the horses are still hunted at times, except on two refuges established for them, one in Nevada and one in the

Pryor Mountains on the Montana-Wyoming border.

Under a bill introduced by Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), no fewer than 12 horse sanctuaries would be established on the public lands in areas where the horses now roam. The horses, on and off the sanctuaries, would become the responsibility of the Secretary of the Interior, who would be required to protect them. There would be no more killing of the horses—as in their sale to the dog food manufacturers. When they have to be thinned to achieve ecological balance, the thinning would be done in a humane way. No estimate is given for the number of horses that would be preserved.

BLM in the past has been the villain of the horse lovers, partly because it tolerated the private roundups and partly because the agency itself had proposed removal of horses from their lands.

BLM, for instance, had outlined three possibilities for the Pryor Mountain horses before the present refuge was established. The agency clearly favored the alternative that looked to multi-purpose management for both horses and wildlife—possibly including reintroduction of the Big Horn sheep into the area. This alternative would have required drastic reductions in the 200 or so horses in this area. However, a special citizens committee set up by BLM resulted in the establishment of the present refuge and greater emphasis on horses. Even so, there probably will have to be some reduction in their numbers, BLM says.

"If you have a variety of forage and enough of it," says Charles Most, BLM assistant state director in Billings, Mont., "then the horses and other wildlife will remain in balance." But, he adds, the horses in the Pryors are eating a plant called mountain mahogany, which deer also browse on. Thus, he



Photos: Bureau of Land Management



The question about fighting stallions: Is it for territory or for mares?

believes, there is competition. BLM also believes the overgrazing is causing erosion in the area.

Dr. Michael J. Pontrelli of the University of Nevada at Reno believes the competition is much over-emphasized, although he does not insist the horses never compete with livestock or other wildlife. The horse herds, he believes, are more or less self-managing, partly because of their great tendency toward territoriality. He says the self-limited herds probably stay away from livestock by staying in the higher elevations of a range and by traveling long distances to water if necessary.

But James Feist, a wildlife specialist from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who did behavioral studies of the horses in the Pryor Mountains, thinks the horses are not territorial. "I watched six to seven bands of the horses at once," says Feist. "There is absolutely no territoriality." Instead, he finds that a stud will group a harem of several mares around him to form a band. The bands remain discrete, with a stud fighting off other studs, but all of the bands will roam over the same territory.

This does not mean that Feist agrees there is a need to reduce the numbers of horses. "There is no appreciable competition between horses and the mule deer in the area," he says. (There is no domestic livestock on the Pryor range.) The reproduction rate of the horses—a .47 foal-mare ratio—is low, he says, and he agrees with Dr. Pontrelli that the horses are self-managing. Besides the low birth rate, he adds, only about half the newborn foals make it through the hard winters. Feist insists that until there is more data on the horses, there is no justification for reduction of the herd. "Just leave them alone for now," he suggests.

Feist has also scotched another controversy. BLM had earlier insisted that the Pryor Mountain horses had little if any Spanish blood, that more likely

they were descendants of plugs that had left neighboring farms and ranches. Feist says his examinations of the coloring and patterning of the horses, and of skeletons he found on the range, proves beyond doubt that there is a strong Spanish strain in the herd. The lumbar vertebra configuration of the mustang is unique, and Feist claims his skeletal examinations does prove Spanish descent.

As a practical matter, it appears that with the Pryor Mountain herd, most of the horse lovers' demands will be met. "I'm not sure there are two sides to this issue any more," Most says. If there is a need to thin the herd, humane methods—perhaps killing of maimed or deformed animals on the site—will be used. With the establishment of the refuge, there is little doubt the herd will survive.

The Jackson bill, or one like it, is probably assured of passage, and horses elsewhere in the West are also likely to be protected. Gradually, the horse lovers have worn down the resistance of cattlemen to preservation of the horses. The other prime anti-horse group, the wildlife interests, may be partly mollified by findings such as Feist's that indicate the competition is less than they had thought.

But there is little scientific data available. "We really don't know anything about the horses," says Most, and the other contenders, whatever their emotional persuasion, tend to agree. Far more detailed behavioral and ecological studies are required, they say.

The strongest argument yet made on either side may be author J. Frank Dobie's description of the wild horse as "The most beautiful, the most spirited and the most inspiring creature ever to print foot on the grasses of America." This argument appears to have saved the horses, and it is probably a good thing. Now, the scientists will have time to learn about the ecological realities of the mustangs. □

films OF THE WEEK

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HEY DOC. 16mm, color, sound, 26 min. A film about Dr. Ethel Allen, a black physician who is medical adviser, confessor and friend to the people of north Philadelphia's ghetto jungle. Cameras follow her to schools, through the slum streets and into her office to spotlight the lives of the addicted, the aged, the angry. Presented without the use of narrators, scripts, actors or staged interviews. Audience: general. Purchase \$300 from Carousel Films, Dept. SN, 1501 Broadway, Suite 1503, New York, N.Y. 10036.

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