

Proposal for Wild Horse/Burro Reserve Design as a Solution to Present Crisis

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Unless urgent action is taken, wild horses and burros in today's America face a bleak future. Though the unanimously passed Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 originally set aside somewhere between 53 million and 88 million acres for their preservation in the wild, the rights of these animals and their public supporters have been undermined and denied by the very officials charged with protecting them. Current policies toward these national heritage species are thinly disguised plans for either bringing their populations to crippling low, non-viable levels or for totally eliminating them from their legal areas. Even if some 30,000 wild horses and burros remain on the public lands (and many think that only 16,000 remain), this figure is in no way commensurate with the amount of ecologically appropriate habitat in which they have the legal right to live. With our government's current goal to drastically reduce the already tiny wild herds (over 12,000 to be removed in FY 2010) coupled with its emphasis on male-skewed sex ratios and temporary sterilization through PZP injection of mares, our nation's last remaining wild horses and burros find themselves in a survival crisis, indeed, one in many ways more imperiled than in 1971, for their chief enemies reside within the very agencies (BLM & USFS) charged with their protection.

To remedy this intolerable situation, the people of America must immediately and audaciously respond with a well-conceived plan for change. As a wildlife ecologist and fourth-generation Nevadan personally familiar with the Western wild equids, I now present a way to restore America's wild horses and burros as viable natural herds throughout the West and to obviate those cruel and disruptive roundups and reproductive manipulations that are only making a mockery of the Act.

Wildlife, wilderness and conservation professionals call this strategy Reserve Design. This combines both ecological and political considerations in order to achieve desirable goals. Basically wild horse/burro Reserve Design involves the setting aside of areas of wild horse/burro-containing habitat where human intervention is strictly controlled/buffered against and where natural processes are allowed to reestablish natural checks and balances. In this way, a significant degree of internal harmony is achieved for all diverse yet interrelated species (including man) within the ecosystem in question.

Some of the more obvious necessities of Reserve Design are:

- (1) Properly identifying the survival requirements of the principal species to be accommodated in the reserve. In this case we would be promoting a wild horse/burro-containing ecosystem.

- (2) Identifying appropriate geographical areas suitable for the implementation of wild horse/burro-containing reserves.
- (3) Incorporating natural barriers that will limit the ingress and/or the egress of certain species, including the wild horses and burros. This would be for the purposes of avoiding conflicts and setting up conditions for the self-regulation, or self-stabilization of populations, particularly equids.
- (4) Identifying where buffer zones, artificial barriers, or other means of impeding movements in and out of the reserve should be established. These will keep the species in question from coming into conflict. This will include what is termed semi-permeable barriers that do not restrict other species but do prevent equids from passing through. However, well-conceived buffer zones are usually more suitable to produce the desired results.
- (5) Identifying the presence and abundance of necessary food, water, shelter, mineral procurement sites, elevational gradients for seasonal migrations, etc. – factors that will accommodate the long-term needs of viable wild equid populations.
- (6) Identifying geographical regions whose people are well disposed toward the creation and long-term implementation of extensive, ecologically balanced wild horse/burro-containing reserves.
- (7) Identifying ways of promoting wild equid reserves and of implementing reserve design that will result in win-win relationships centered around the wild horse/burro reserves. Ecotourism is one major possibility here. Restoring native wild horse/burro-containing ecosystems, including soils and native species, is another. Also, the reduction of flammable vegetation through equid grazing and the restoration of hydrographic basins, or water catchment areas, constitute other important, positive consequences of the reserves. Indeed, the restoration of the “equid element” in North America has a crucial role to play in combating the life-disrupting threats of Global Warming itself. I appreciate your attention and do not hesitate in contacting me concerning this proposal.