

**Bungle In the Jungle: Has Pollit's Brumby Research Unit
lost it's way in Australia's Outback?**

by Jaime Jackson (September 11th, 2009)

Ever since issuing my memo earlier this year announcing the new research agenda of Dr. Chris Pollit's Australian Brumby Research Unit, I, like a lot of hoof care professionals, have looked forward with much anticipation and enthusiasm to a great learning experience. But with the release of the Unit's most recent July newsletter, directed by Pollit's research student, Brian Hampson, who ostensibly is also directing all of the Unit's field operations, I am beginning to wonder if enthusiasm is less warranted than skepticism. I am increasingly asking myself, "Has Pollit's Brumby Research Unit lost it's way in the Australia's Outback?"

My problem (so far) is not with the research they are doing (see my comments about the need for research at the end of this commentary), but some of the reckless conclusions released by the Unit in their online research abstracts, and what appears to be a lack of critical thinking in how some of this research is being carried out. In short, things are seeming a little sloppy "down under".

The first grand faux pax came in the aftermath of an unexpected side trip to New Zealand, where the Unit would investigate the "foot health of the Kaimanawa feral horse population." In an inversion of common sense, rational objectivity, and what might have been good science, the Unit set out to prove ("test") two rather bizarre hypotheses: that this population had a broad range of hoof types, and that there would be a high incidence of foot pathology. A more scientific approach would have been to simply investigate the population with an open mind, and report their findings. What most NHC investigators like myself already knew -- and clearly prejudiced the Unit -- is that the Kaimanawa rangelands are grassy founder traps, and most of the horses there are predictably laminitic.

Hence, it came as no surprise that the Unit would announce in May, "The results of this study demonstrated a broad range of foot pathology in the Kaimanawa feral horse population." Clearly, the Unit had some catching up to do with the rest of the NHC community that has long known what happens to horses living in these kinds of pasturelands. And maybe the Unit would have saved itself some time and expense. On the brighter side, the study is potentially useful as a documentation which NHC practitioner can use to persuade horse owners to avoid using green grass pastures. But what came next (in the abstract) stunned virtually everyone listening in: "Contrary to popular belief, the feral horse foot type should not ideally be used as a model for the domestic horse foot." A month later, and no doubt after coming under siege by the clearer thinkers, the Unit scrambled to correct themselves, "This statement . . . is perhaps misleading. We do not suggest that ALL feral horse feet are not good representatives of healthy

feet, but that the Kaimanawa feral horse population, specifically, have suboptimal foot health and should not be viewed as ideal models."

I hope this addendum was put into the official record before being published in the Australian Veterinary Journal. I don't know how many hoof care professionals, vets, researchers and horse owners read the Unit's earlier conclusion and simply walked away, concluding that wild horses are worthless study models.

I think a number of us were a bit shaken by this "close call", but remained somewhat reassured that Pollit (running things in the background) would demand a little more critical thinking and acting from the Unit in the future. But with the arrival of the Unit's July newsletter and abstract, we are beginning to wonder if Pollit -- clearly one of the great thinkers in the equine research community -- is even involved.

The next hiatus in credible science followed directly on the heels of the Kaimanawa bungle, when the Unit announced the preliminary results of their April "Brumby Swap" in their July newsletter. This was a clearly misconceived and misguided "experiment" to see what happens to horses feet when taken from a "soft to hard substrate" and vice versa. The main problem with the project, in my opinion, is that the Unit has lacked critical input from experienced NHC practitioners who understand the kinds of hoof changes (what we call 4th-Dimensional changes in hoof mass) the horses' feet were undergoing. In what can only be described as an ill-informed, panic-based decision, one of the horses was pulled from the experiment believing that the mare's "wear rate . . . exceeded her growth rate."

But photographs of the mare's feet, shown side-by-side in chronology, revealed hooves initially severely overgrown (having lived in a soft substrate terrain), then transforming in just a few months to what conspicuously appear to be naturally worn, exemplary hooves (typical of hard substrate hooves) by NHC and Great Basin wild horse standards. The visual documentation, obviously, appears to clash with the Unit's conclusions. The visible and very obvious 4-D changes make total sense -- nature was not only dispensing with a terrible excess of old growth, but the hooves were becoming naturally shaped. Given enough time, and less meddling by the Unit, the hooves no doubt would have completed their transition.

But the panic-stricken Unit made the pull, defending their actions on humanitarian grounds -- in my opinion, irresponsible conjecture -- declaring, "At that rate of wear she would have run out of hoof in the next few months." The mare was even taken home by one of the researchers to be fed and conditioned. In my mind, this is bad science from front to end and is an exercise more in meddling, obstruction of natural processes, and sentimentality -- "It was good to find her and bring her back home. She had obviously had a hard 3 months in the desert and had lost a fair bit of condition." -- than useful research. In the end, the Unit admonishes us, "This should

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be a warning to anyone considering letting their old faithful horse let loose to run with the brumbies/mustangs in retirement." A specious conclusion drawn off of faulty, if not, aborted science.

At least one American barefoot hoof care group is now rather cavalierly promoting this same field director in a forthcoming speaking tour in St. Louis, as "the foremost authority on wild horse behavior and habitat." That's quite the accolade to hang on a research director who again and again seems misled by his Unit's findings and protocols. I'm not sure when or where the wake-up call to Pollit is going to come from, but his Unit needs tighter peer review before going public and better committee input before heading into the Outback.

I also have to ask, why aren't American researchers out in our own wild horse country? Those of us who have spent a decade or more using our Great Basin model know this is an invaluable source of information -- and we apply what we know very effectively every day with domestic horses. We need them out there now garnering important information about diet, habitat, behavior, and more. What we are getting is pharmaceutical funded research aimed at generating and dumping more and more dangerous chemicals, biotoxins, and molasses-laden feeds into horses that only complicate their lives -- and our work as humanitarian professionals. What is needed is useful, well-thought out, and science-based information. What we don't need is another bungle in the jungle.

Jaime Jackson