WILD HORSE PRESERVATION ZONES A HUMANE AND SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION FOR A NATIONAL TREASURE by Jaime Jackson

It has been 39 years since I entered the U.S. Great Basin to study our country's wild, free-roaming horses. At that time, during the early years of the Reagan Administration, the Bureau of Land Management had initiated a strategic campaign to selectively remove wild horses from approximately 350 Herd Management Areas (HMAs). These horses — the government and others claimed — were overpopulating public lands, encroaching on leased grazing lands of ranchers, overgrazing and destroying sensitive riparian systems, and entering military and mining operations where they had become a significant nuisance. The horses had come under the protection of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse & Burro Act a decade earlier, but they were also subject to sharing the land with the aforementioned as part of the law's "multiple use" clause. What this meant is that their numbers also had to be kept in check, thus, the removal gathers.

Almost immediately, the various interests — ranchers, environmentalists, industrialists, wild horse advocates, and even the public — collided within the framework of the law. Over the 1980s, I had bore direct witness to this melee, which often involved litigious battles in court among the various factions. Amid what I perceived to be dwindling populations of wild horses in the HMAs, I wrote in the 1992 edition of my book *The Natural Horse: Lessons From the Wild*, "Whatever the [natural] selection process holds for the future of the feral horse is difficult to foretell, given the unrelenting and diversifying influences perpetrated by people every year — for example, artificial selection, removal and sterilization campaigns, erosion of natural habitat, greenhouse effect."*

But here we are today, near four decades later, and the same contentious atmosphere over what to do with our wild horses continues. With the result that wild horse numbers are now more than twice what I witnessed in the early 1980s. Even with thousands of private adoptions sanctioned by the government, wild horse numbers continue to proliferate in the HMAs. And each new gathering cycle brings in thousands of new captives – where are you going to put them? As it is, tens of thousands of unadoptable wild horses languish in long term holding corrals, some say more than what live in the HMAs! The BLM warns:

As of March 1, 2020, the BLM estimated more than 95,000 wild horses and burros lived on public lands that can sustainably support just 27,000. Absent a change in course and support from Congress, wild horse and burro populations on public lands are expected to rise to approximately 2.8 million by 2040, but not before causing catastrophic harm to the land and other wildlife species.**

Today, as I mentioned above, there is some movement towards artificial selection using chemical contraceptives, but this is tantamount to eugenics breed-

*Retained in the Introduction to the 2020 edition.

**ICYMI: BLM's Adoption Incentive Program a Success at the One Year Mark as Agency Takes Steps to Address Wild Horse and Burro Overpopulation. https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro

ing, and not natural selection. Not mindful of this at all, the BLM continues:

To help address the growing overpopulation of wild horses on public rangelands, the Bureau of Land Management has started testing a promising new fertility control vaccine as part of a joint research project between the BLM and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's National Wildlife Research Center. Researchers believe the Oocyte Growth Factor (OGF) vaccine, administered to a captured wild mare through a single dose, may safely prevent pregnancy for up to three years or longer.

Though the research is still in its very early phase, if proven viable, the OGF vaccine could help bolster existing methods used by the BLM to manage wild horse populations. The most common fertility control vaccines for wild horses in use today are short-lasting and require near-annual retreatment to remain effective. A single-dose vaccine that can last multiple years, such as the OGF vaccine if proven viable, would provide a number of benefits for BLM, including requiring fewer instances of gathering animals for retreatment or permanent removal.

Meanwhile, the government is constantly harangued by critics to do something about overpopulation in the HMAs, citing, correctly so in their own defense, the fact that it takes a lot of taxpayer money to feed that many unadoptable horses, not to mention the enormous expense of managing and removing more and more horses from the HMAs.

None of this surprises me. In 2010, I wrote an AANHCP position paper concerning troubling BLM management practices, focusing at the time on a massive gather taking place in northern Nevada. In that paper I proposed that we sack the failed 1971 law altogether and replace it with a new vision with legislation for genuine wild horse "protection." I proposed that we dissolve the HMAs and create wild horse "Preservation Zones" in their wake. These zones would represent an ecologically sound haven for our wild horses — and other affected wild life in the HMAs. Here, the safety net of natural selection would govern population dynamics rather than politics and incongruous multiple-use agendas. The Preservation Zones, as I envisioned them, would also augur well for tax payers, multiple-use interests, and even the politicians because it removes wild horses completely, or nearly so, from the current management debacle that simply cannot work no matter what.

Below is the "skeletal" framework for the Preservation Zones extracted from my paper. Obviously, it is an opener for much discussion, and that is my intent. But knowing wild horse country as I do, and particularly the great value of our wild horses, this is something we can and should put together as a nation.

PROPOSAL

1970 law is revisited and dismantled by Congress. This is important because until our wild horses are removed from its multiple-use agenda, the horses will continue to suffer both in the ranges and in the holding corrals.

- 2. Federally legislated "Preservation Zones" are simultaneously created from select HMAs and/or other suitable private/public lands to facilitate free-roaming wild horse populations. This should be an easy one for Congress to get behind, and I would think, the grazing, agricultural, and mining industries would be supportive too, as it would, once and for all get wild horses out of their way. Conversely, it gives the horses a new lease on life based on natural selection.
- 3. An Oversight Committee, appointed by Congress, assumes legal command of all operations in the Preservation Zones. The objective here is to administer "protection" of the wild, free-roaming horse, through the science on natural selection has opposed to current multiple-use management practices of the HMAs. The AANHCP could play a vital role in this effort.
- 4. HMA herds and horses in BLM holding centers are selected and relocated to the Preservation Zones. This will probably be grounds for the hottest debate concerning the implementation of the zones. Not all horses will fit into the zones, and they will have to go elsewhere. But the outcomes don't have to be bleak for those horses not entering the zones. Certainly their listless lives in the holding corrals aren't acceptable, and I see many positive alternatives for these horses.
- 5. Other wildlife, including natural predators (e.g., cougars) to horses, are also relocated to the Preservation Zones. This concerns the symbiotic relationships based on prey-predator tensions necessary for both natural population control and not surprising, the vitalities of both prey and predator. There are formal studies done on wild horse predation, and these need to be front and center in any serious discussion of the Preservation Zones.
- 6. The American Bison (buffalo) replaces commercial bovine in the Preservation Zones. My observations of wild horses actually included domestic bovine also living among the horses. Some were clearly "wild" themselves, having broken away from their owners at some point in the past. What is clear is that, as parallel feeders and occupiers of the wild horse home ranges, they contributed in some measure to the vitality of the horses. There is a historical precedent to this assertion, as early explorers in North America noted wild horse bands following in the wake of the great bison herds. What was the nature of this symbiosis? I believe the answer lies in the vegetation that both ate somehow contributed to the health of both. Bison, therefore, are a logical ungulate to include in the Preservation Zones for the sake of research and for a better understanding of how and why these species commingled to the advantage of the both.
- 7. Habitat in Preservation Zones is restored/rehabilitated to their natural states to facilitate the high desert adaptation of E. Caballus. Studies of riparian systems in the Great Basin by scientists have shed important light on the native state of the Great Basin. I observed these study areas first hand during my own studies of wild horses and their home ranges. Overgrazing of the lands by livestock interests have put the "true landscape" of the Great Basin that nature selected for on hold. The Preserva-

- tion Zones would unlock the riparian systems, the native vegetation, and ubiquitous mineral deposits of the post-Pleistocene Epoch that favored the ancient adaptation of *Equus ferus ferus* that gave us the wild horses we know and appreciate today.
- 8. Visitor centers are created to facilitate public education and financial support. People from all over the world have a keen interest in wild animals and, for countless horse owners today, in wild horses, in particular. They have much to teach us far beyond their "romantic" images of the "wild west." Visitor centers strategically positioned in the Preservation Zones will serve to inculcate appreciation of wild life in the zones, and encourage financial support of the zones as well.
- 9. Recognizing the expertise and experience of many current BLM HMA managers, they could assume new roles in the Preservation Zones as administrators of field operations. The Preservation Zones would be, for the most part, closed to the public. Obviously, they are intended to preserve our wild horses in their native states, so they are not zoos in any conventional sense. Still, the zones must be carefully "managed" to insure that symbiotic relationships between wild species, the impact of wild life on native flora, and the general vitality of all life in the zones is in good order. This is where good science and effective management should come together.
- 10. Advocacy and scientific research is formulated and conducted. I mentioned above that wild horses (and other species cohabitating in the Preservation Zones) have much to teach us. These aren't hollow words, they speak to what we can learn and apply in our own lives with animals in our care. In fact, this is the vital mission of the AANHCP. This is an area deserved of much discussion and planning for the Preservation Zones