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Wild Horse Preservation Zones:

A Humane and Sustainable Solution to
a National Treasure



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It has been 35 years since I entered the U.S. Great Basin to study our country's wild, free-roaming horses. At that time, early 1980s during 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 gathers.

Lessons from the Wild

Almost immediately, the various interests – ranchers, environmentalists, industrialists, wild horse advocates, and even the public – collided within the framework of the law. By the late 1980s, I had bore direct witness to this melee, which often involved litigious battles among the various factions in court. Amid what I perceived to be dwindling populations of wild horses in the HMAs, I would write my 1992 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 – e.g., artificial selection, removal and sterilization campaigns, erosion of natural habitat, greenhouse effect."

But here we are today, 34 years later, and the same contentious battles over what to do with our wild horses continue. Even with thousands of private

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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. Meanwhile, the government is constantly harangued by critics to do something about it, citing 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.^[1] In that paper I proposed that we sack the failed 1970 law altogether and replace it with a new vision and 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 envision them, would 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, with some expanded commentary. 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 for Wild Horse Preservation Zones

- **1970 law is revisited and dismantled by Congress.**
This is important because until our wild horses are removed from its multiple-use agenda, including eugenics science, the horses will continue to suffer both in the ranges and in the holding corrals.
- **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 politicians 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.
- **An Oversight Committee, appointed by Congress, assumes legal command of all operations in the Preservation Zones.**
Here, we need to be really careful, as there are too many misguided people out there roaming around the issues concerning wild horses who really know nothing about them but who will try to push agendas that have no place in the Preservation Zones. The best way to build a strong, forward thinking Oversight Committee is to put the AANHCP in an advisory role. This role would include both selecting members and helping to define the command structure.
- **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.
- **Other wildlife, including natural predators (e.g., cougars) to *E. Caballus*, are relocated to the Preservation Zones.**
I’ve taken this up in *The Natural Horse* and my other writings. 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.
- **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 health of both. Bison, therefore, are a logical ungulate to include in the Preservation Zones – for the sake of research and to a better understanding of how and why these species commingled to the advantage of the other.

- **Habitat in Preservation Zones is restored/rehabilitated to their natural states to facilitate the post-Pleistocene 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 Preservation Zones would unlock the riparian systems, the native vegetation, and ubiquitous mineral deposits of the post-Pleistocene Era that favored the ancient adaptation of *Equus ferus ferus* that gave us the wild horses we know and appreciate today.

- **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 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 both inculcate appreciate values of wild life in the zones, but encourage financial support of the zones as well.

- **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.

- **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.



^[1] AANHCP Director's Message, "Showdown at Calico Mountain: Is the Future of the Wild Horse in Jeopardy?" January 11, 2010. https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0311/6673/files/Showdown_at_Calico_Mountain.pdf?188

^[2] In Defense of Animals.

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“Our vital mission is to advance the humane care and management of domestic equines worldwide through the application of proven practices and principles, based on the research and findings of wild, free-roaming equines living naturally in the U.S. Great Basin, as well as to advocate for the preservation of these wild, free-roaming horses living on U.S. public lands.”

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