

Humane Stewardship

In 1968, Assateague Island National Seashore began managing its 28 horses as a wild, free-roaming herd. By 1989, the island's wild horse population had reached 142, and something had to be done. The fragile dune and marsh grasses were threatened by the pressure of too many hooves and hungry mouths.

In 1988, at the invitation of the National Park Service, Drs. Jay Kirkpatrick, John Turner, and Irwin Liu brought a new contraceptive vaccine, Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP), to Assateague. Liu had already shown that PZP prevented pregnancy in domestic mares, but would it work in the wild? Kirkpatrick and Turner vaccinated the Assateague horses using a dart rifle – without ever capturing or handling a horse – and reduced pregnancy rates in treated mares by 90 – 95 percent. The vaccine didn't affect the unborn foals of pregnant mares or alter the horses' social behavior. And, after 30 years of research, we now know that it actually extends the mares' lives by sparing them the burdens of raising multiple foals. Contraception is maintained with an animal booster, but, it's reversible – mares can become pregnant if vaccinations are stopped.

In 1995, with the horse population reaching 175, the NPS conducted an environmental review and decided to gradually reduce the number to 120 and they manage to this number today. With the horses' numbers controlled by contraception, the threat they pose to the fragile island ecosystem also diminishes. And our success on Assateague shows that ecological stewardship and the humane treatment of wildlife can be applied in partnership to benefit land, animals, and the people who enjoy both.

Assateague Island Alliance (AIA) partners with the Assateague Island National Seashore to promote the awareness and protection of the island's wildlife and natural resources for the enjoyment of current and future generations.

Learn more about Assateague Island Alliance by going to our webpage

<https://assateagueislandalliance.org/best-beaches/>

OR

Visit and "LIKE" us on our two Facebook pages
Official AIA Page (Discover "official"
announcements and learn about upcoming
events)

<https://www.facebook.com/AssateagueIslandAlliance/>

Official AIA Group Page for Assateague
Photographers and Visitors

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/40052482011/>

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Protecting the WILD HORSES of Assateague Island National Seashore



*Here's how **YOU** can help save
and preserve Assateague's
Wildlife*





The Assateague Island Wild Horses

Wild horses have lived on Assateague Island for more than 300 years. They eat, drink, sleep and raise their young on Assateague Island National Seashore - it's their home.

The Assateague wild animals - like all horses - are amazingly adaptable. They have survived by becoming efficient in their use of the limited food and water available in this environment. Part of this survival mechanism is a decrease in the size of the individual horses over many generations. Their smaller size had led people to call them ponies, but, they **are** powerful wild horses.

Visiting the Horses

The Assateague horses are wild animals, and they behave accordingly. Like African zebras or Buffalo in the west, they may attack aggressively when they believe they are threatened. Sudden movement from people may startle them and cause them to bite or kick.

See something, say something! Call the rangers at **757.898.0058**.

Stallions (males) are very protective of the mares (females) in their harems and mares are very protective of their foals. They may look docile, but, don't be fooled. These horses are strong, resourceful, and independent and can become aggressive quickly.

To enjoy your visit to the fullest, please follow a few simple rules:

Don't feed the horses

Feeding the horses is strictly prohibited by the National Park Service and can cause them serious health and survival problems. Horses are not picky eaters and will eat just about anything offered to them. They enjoy junk food as much as we do, but, introducing things such as chips and, even carrots and apples, limits their ability to digest the food necessary for them to survive the cold, wet times of the year. We've lost horses because of people feeding them, as they get something called "colic" (abdominal pain or obstruction).

Store all of your food in sturdy, latched containers to avoid having your campsite ransacked by a prowling horse looking for a handout. They are "pro's" at finding food and have even been known to open coolers or completely destroy them.

The most important reason not to feed the horses is that feeding them brings them close to people and vehicles and teaches them bad behavior. This is dangerous for you - some horses will stick their heads into a car window looking for food and become quite aggressive, if there's nothing to eat. This is also dangerous for the horses - they may be large animals, but they are NO match for cars. At least one horse every year tragically dies from an automobile collision.

Refrain from "Watering" the horses

It gets hot in the summer on the island and sometimes people turn on the spigots to let the horses drink. There are plenty of fresh watering holes on the island and the horses know exactly where there are. Turning on the water encourages the horse to hang out in highly populated areas and they can become very aggressive with each other in trying to get to the water, often kicking and biting. Visitors do NOT want to get in the middle of this interaction, for sure.

Respect the horses' privacy

An Assateague horse's life is a struggle. Day and night they have to graze, try to stay cool (or warm), evade flies and mosquitos, conserve energy, feed and guard their foals, keep up with the social rituals of their bands (groups) and dodge tourists. So, they may become quite cranky if you try to approach, pet, chase or otherwise harass them. In response, they can inflict serious injury with a sharp bite or a kick.

Drive slowly and cautiously

Assateague isn't a raceway NOR is it a petting farm. It's a place to relax and enjoy the seashore, the animals and plants. Opportunistic horses often hang out by the roads looking for food offerings because many have come to associate vehicles with food. And, horses are vulnerable to being struck by a moving vehicle, especially at dusk or at night. Know that wild horses RARELY survive such an impact.

