

Pilgrimage

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The Wild Horse Question

As a nation, we imprison almost as many mustangs as we allow in the wild. The situation strikes everybody as unfortunate—including public officials. Even so, the number of horses held captive in Bureau of Land Management (BLM) pens has grown. BLM agents find themselves without a strategy for managing the animals that Federal law charges them to protect. Questions loom with no answers. How many mustangs do we allow on the prairie? Where? Under what conditions? Do we sell them to slaughter houses? Can we increase adoptions? Sterilization? A good number of agribusiness people would like mustangs removed from public land in order to make more room for cows. Hunters claim that horses eat the plants that feed their quarry. Mustang advocates would have the BLM release the horses that they're currently holding captive. When you add up all of these perceptions, you find the sort of dilemma that policy scholars describe as a, "wicked problem."

The defining trait of wicked problems is they lack a technical solution. We cannot address them by determining true or false. Instead, they require us to make distinctions between good and bad. Rather than turning to data for answers, wicked problems demand that we judge potential solutions against an array of values, some of them at odds. The situation makes it hard to even frame proper questions.

For example, in the absence of wolves and bears, mountain lions are the only animals that prey on mustangs, and they only take the young, sick, or aged. Thus, in years where there are low rates of mortality, wild horse numbers hold the potential to grow by up to 20 percent. Some suggest that we should remove horses from public land because predation cannot cull their numbers. But on that line of reason, one might argue that the problem is not that there is a potential for too many mustangs. You could cite the problem as a shortage of predators. Stated that way, the answer is obvious: increase the number of

wolves, bears, and mountain lions so as to maintain stable populations of horses in the wild. Personally, I like this framing of the problem. I also favor the solution, but it is possible that agribusiness people disapprove of predators even more than they dislike wild horses. Stock growers keep lists of things that bother them about nature. Herds of mustangs, coyotes, and prairie dogs make the lineup, but wolves, bears, and lions have always stood at the top of the list. Still, the law protecting wild horses serves as a testimony to our national priorities.

In 1971, Congress passed the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. The act received unanimous support. It passed in both the House and Senate without one single vote of dissent. The act makes it plain: wild horses “enrich the lives of the American people.” In other words—they’re good. Mustangs are beautiful and free. Americans have a hard time resisting beauty, and we also tend to covet freedom. The Wild Horse Act is a statement of our values.

In the late twentieth century, politicians from different parties often found issues they agreed upon. Proposals frequently enjoyed bi-partisan backing, but today, rifts and rancor define our discourse. If a bill contains a moral statement, we consider it suspect. Politicians avoid issues that relate to ethics because they understand that declarations of value will be met by opposition. We don’t propose or pass laws on the basis of good or right or beautiful. Rightness and beauty don’t even merit a conversation. If they did, we would find the discussions uncomfortable. The rifts between us have grown. We lost the ability to unite around a set of beliefs.

Instead of collaborating and crafting laws with a shared sense of beauty or truth, we limit ourselves to technical questions or questions of economics. We talk about maximizing efficiency. We write laws in the allegedly unbiased language of scientists, but we do so to avoid arguments about desires or virtue. The wild horse debate makes for a case-in-point. The original act that granted a place for mustangs in the wild contained sweeping statements about the animals’ importance, but the bill has been amended twice. In 1976 and 1978 the law received alterations that, together, add nearly as much language as found in

the original legislation. The amendments detail a series of technical matters. They describe the conditions under which the BLM can either remove horses from the wild or destroy them in the case of illness, age, or injury. In the years since the passing of the Wild Horse Act, the BLM has used “science” to justify the removal of mustangs from more than 40 percent of the land granted to them by Federal law.

We live in the age of the engineer. Bill Gates and the late Steve Jobs serve as examples of the sorts of figures that we elevate to hero-like status. In contrast, few people can name the nation’s poet laureate, and even fewer can identify a scholar working in an area of the humanities. We don’t grant a place for poets, artists, or philosophers in debates about issues of consequence. Poets and artists give thought to aesthetics. Philosophers assess the morality of our decisions, but we currently favor technical answers to our ethical questions.

From a scientific standpoint, the case for rounding up and removing wild horses from public land is thin. There are few species that deserve a place in the United States more than the horse. The animal evolved in North America. Fossil records suggests that the process began on the plains of Wyoming, more than 50 million years ago. Horses either became extinct or saw their numbers reduced in the last ice age. Paleontologists disagree about the extent, date, and cause of the horse’s decline. Some argue that they were hunted to the brink of oblivion. Others suspect a plague or a shift in the food sources available to them. We do not know when horses disappeared. We don’t know how or why or even if they went extinct, but we know that the fossil record goes cold with a 7,500 year old set of bones found up in Canada. In any case, the history of the genus equus is well established. None of us can claim this continent as our evolutionary home, but horses can.

Because they evolved here, the biological arguments for removing horses do not stand up to scrutiny. Stock growers often complain that horses overgraze the land, but in 2015, the state of Wyoming played host to more than 1.2 million cows, and roughly 3,800 mustangs. The situation makes a person wonder, which animals consume more of

the state's forage? Ironically, horses and cows rarely compete for food. Cattle do not usually range further than a mile from a water source, whereas horses will roam ten miles from a pond or stream. Horses also graze steeper slopes than cows—and at higher elevation.

Cattle are more likely to stay where they can find a drink. They set up residence beside rivers. In the process, they denude the banks of our waterways. They remove the shade plants from the shore, which raises the temperature of creeks. They stand in the current and relieve themselves. That causes contamination. The presence of cows on a river can change its nature for the worse. A well-known fisheries biologist, Robert Behnke, once cited commercial livestock grazing on public land as the greatest threat to the health of trout streams in the West.

Horses rarely spend time in riparian areas, and as a result of their biology, mustangs also graze differently than stock. Critics claim that wild horses trim plants too close to the ground. They possess teeth that work together like scissors. Horses shear off grasses a short distance from the dirt. On the other hand, cows use molar-like teeth to grab their food. Their teeth work in the manner of a plier. Cattle may grip grasses a greater distance from the ground, but they are forced to pull them free, dislodging roots in the process. The next time you get a haircut, ask yourself, would you rather have your stylist use a scissor or a pair of pliers? Scissor-like teeth leave roots intact so plants can live to grow another day. Horses also replenish their own forage. When they eat grasses they return the plants' seeds to the soil in the form of manure. Horse apples contain whole seeds—set to grow. In contrast, cattle ruminate their food through four separate stomach compartments. By the time they excrete the seeds of the plants they have eaten, the kernels are often too eroded to reproduce themselves.

Are there too many wild horses? How many mustangs do we need? Like the late wilderness advocate Bob Marshall, I would answer these questions with a question: "How many Brahms' symphonies do we need?" Of course the answer is, "All of them." At one time, the western states provided a home for a herd of 60 million bison. Today,

the BLM currently holds more than 47,000 wild horses in pens that mustang advocates describe as “concentration camps.” If we turned all of the interned horses loose, and then added them to the BLMs estimate of 56,000 free-roaming animals, that would bring the total to 103,000 wild horses. If the grasslands of the West could support 60 million bison, then they can support 103,000 horses. From an ecological standpoint, 103,000 mustangs do not present a threat to the health or state of the North American continent. We do not remove wild horses from public land because of their impact on the prairie, however. We round up and imprison mustangs when we find them eating more food than we allot them, in relation to cows.

I spend most of my free time on the horse herd management areas that make up the Red Desert Complex in Wyoming. On these parcels, the BLM grants 89% of the forage—on land reserved for mustangs—to cattle. Nationally, we allot 97% of the eatable grass on public land to livestock and 3% to wild horses. Consequently, as a nation, we spend more than 70 million tax dollars a year, rounding up, confining, and feeding mustangs—so that private herds of cows have enough to eat on public property. You don’t have to count yourself as a wild horse advocate to find this practice objectionable.

Our decision to limit the number of horses in the wild represents a choice we made based on the economic interests of a small group of people, as opposed to research in fields like plant or animal biology. We apply a veneer of science to our decisions, so as to make our choices palatable, but the question of how we ought to act toward wild horses does not come with a technical solution. It is a wicked problem. From the standpoint of ecology, there is plenty of grass for all of the wild horses on the prairie, and all of the ones that we keep locked in storage, too. When wild horse detractors cry, “There are too many mustangs!” it is important to understand that these words are not statements of fact. They are declarations of bias.

As the public agency charged with managing the property that we hold in common as a people, the BLM has made an unusual set of

choices with regard to our priorities. Industrial-scale cattle operations are the largest single occupier of our public lands. Across the nation, we allow cows to consume approximately 32 times the food that we allot to mustangs. We allow private herds of livestock to eat far more forage than we reserve for deer and antelope. By the look of things, you would think that the American people value the subsidization of agribusinesses more than hunting, fishing, hiking, camping or bird and wildlife watching.

I'm not sure that is true. I am not sure that was ever true, but in this age of urbanization and technology, it seems especially untrue. Today, large numbers of us are searching for a way to balance digital advances with something more essential, primitive, and organic. Americans visit zoos more often than we attend professional sporting or athletic events. We long for something outside of our virtual and economic lives. We search for ways to pull ourselves out of our roles at home and work and into something even just a little bit wild. Here in the twenty-first century, it would appear that we need the chance to see big, beautiful, and untamed creatures running free more than we need additional red meat. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2015 dietary guidelines actually urge us to consume less beef and spend more time engaged in physical activity. I can't think of a better way to exercise than climbing up a mountain in the West, with the thought of seeing a wild mustang as a prize.

The detention of wild horses cannot continue. Even though we have shown that it is technically possible to capture and confine 47,000 mustangs, the practice is unethical. Individuals and groups differ when it comes to what they see as alternatives to roundups and storage, but I have never met anyone who advocates for the ongoing internment of mustangs. Proposed solutions range from re-opening equine slaughter houses on one hand, through increased private adoptions, to simply returning the horses to freedom. Some of us appreciate these animals. Others would butcher them and then feed them to dogs, but I don't know anyone who favors the long-term warehousing of the

American mustang.

For too long, we have depended on technical reason to address the wild horse question. We use the “how-to” logic of the engineer. We think, “Hey, we have helicopters and high-tech mapping software. We can round them up.” I would concede that there is a role for technology in this quandary, but the most promising role for science comes in the form of an anti-fertility drug, Porcine Zona Pellucida or PZP. We can administer doses with a dart. Thus, it is possible to treat mares in a natural setting. Chemical sterilization may not offer a final solution to the question of how to control the size of our mustang herds, but it is effective in areas without severe winters or predators—in other words—a natural way to limit population growth. An increasing number of horse advocacy groups see birth control as a good alternative to concentration camps.

When it comes to curbing growth in horse populations, we would do well to use the best science available, but the questions that arise over the mustang problem are ethical. How much food should we allow horses to eat in the public areas that we established as their home? Absent any survey data on the subject, my hunch is that for most us, 11% does not seem like enough. On public land managed for multiple use, how much space and resources do we grant to a single use, such as cattle grazing? I suspect the majority of us would see 89% of a public resource devoted to a single purpose as too much. What do we want to see when we visit our birthright, the public grasslands of the West? Elk? Deer? Badgers? Eagles? Coyotes? Somebody’s cows? Wild mustangs? Native grasses bending in the prairie wind? Lately, we’ve been using a combination of thin science, political power, and economic interests to answer these questions. I would argue that these are not the best means to address moral and cultural dilemmas.

We could take additional steps to find out what Americans think about their stake in the public land bequeathed to them by previous generations. More voices would help to understand the nuances of the issue. We should also consult poets and artists. How will future

generations judge us if we fail to consider the aesthetic and inspirational qualities of the land that we all possess together? Will they think of us as wise? Will they see us as fools? We should interview philosophers. There is a new branch of philosophy growing in the area of environmental ethics. In determining what is right, it's probably unrealistic to expect that we could reach a nation-wide consensus as we did in 1971, but at this stage in the wild horse debate, we can no longer afford to put off the search for a solution that is good. ♦