

## Soap Box

### The Wildlife Society responds to CNN report on feral horses

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THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY (TWS) has been working for some time now to educate policy makers and the public concerning the effects of feral horses (often mistakenly called wild horses) on our native ecosystems. In the past year, TWS prepared a fact sheet discussing common misconceptions about feral horses, such as, that they are native to the United States, and developed an official position statement on the topic (TWS 2011). However, the media usually portray feral horses as romantic, free-roaming icons of the American West.

Thus, news stories often frame the issue as magnificent wild horses versus evil government agents harassing them with helicopters and cruelly removing them from their native habitats. That was certainly the storyline of a recent news video, *Battling over the Wild Horse Roundup*, posted January 3, 2011, on *CNN.com* (<<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/us/2011/01/03/zarella.wild.mustangs.cnn?iref=allsearch>>). The piece featured representatives from the Let 'Em Run Foundation, Animal Recovery Mission, and Wild Horse Preservation League espousing the virtues of horses. In contrast, 2 Nevada Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees were shown briefly explaining the multiuse mission of the BLM. There was no discussion of the fact that these horses are nonnative, invasive species or accounting of the damage that they do to native rangelands or wildlife. Without clearly elucidating these aspects of the issue, it was easy to paint BLM as the bad guys who wrench these “rugged, powerful, and independent” horses from their home on the range.

The news piece was immediately added to TWS's file containing examples of biased press coverage on this issue. Sometime later, a TWS member contacted our staff to ask if it had seen the piece, and if TWS was planning to take any action. We decided to contact CNN to explain our concerns about feral horses in general and enclosed TWS's feral horse fact sheet and the November 2010 issue of TWS's member magazine, *The Wildlife Professional*, which featured several articles discussing the history, impacts, and management of feral horses in western North America.

Our letter expressed concern regarding CNN's coverage, noting that the piece lacked a balanced account of the issues at hand and the news network's oversimplified depiction of the situation as “the U.S. government chasing them [the horses] down with helicopters” versus “the animal rights groups who want it stopped.”

We explained that TWS and reputable science recognize feral horses as exotic to North America, and that exotic, or nonnative, species are among the most widespread and serious threats to the integrity of native wildlife populations. The letter also pointed out that although many now-extinct horse lineages evolved in North America, they went extinct approximately 10,000 years ago in North America during the Pleistocene Age, along with many other mammals, including mammoths, mastodons, saber-toothed cats, tapirs, and camels (Bennett and Hoffman 1999, Churcher and Stalker 1970, Kurten 1971). All horses now present in North America are descendants of those that were domesticated in Eurasia and subjected to many

generations of selective breeding (artificial selection) before they were introduced to North America by settlers (Clutton-Brock 1981, Luis et al. 2006, Beever and Aldridge 2011).

TWS' letter to CNN also summarized the significant environmental impacts that feral horses cause, including trampling soils and vegetation, selectively grazing and overutilizing palatable plants, and altering distribution of nutrients in the ecosystem (Beever and Brussard 2004, Beever et al. 2008). Lastly, we suggested that BLM needs to have more tools for managing horses. Existing management practices include: periodic population counts; roundups; contraception to manage population size; adoption of animals to private owners; and humane euthanasia of old, ailing, or unadoptable animals. However, management involving euthanasia, and sometimes roundups themselves, are severely restricted by popular opinion. As a result, animals passed over for adoption are not euthanized; instead, they are placed into short- or long-term holding facilities. Program costs to maintain these facilities are rising to unsustainable levels and are diverting funding that could be used to manage and sustain habitats for native wildlife.

Management of the West's feral horses is complicated and controversial; it necessitates consideration of the full spectrum of issues. For any solution to be viable, the input of an informed public is essential. CNN and other media sources play a key informative role for the public, but it is only through accurate and complete coverage of issues, such as feral horse management, that the public and wildlife are best served.

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