



My Turn

Mesa Verde's wild horses: Opportunity for change

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Wild horses have wandered the trails of Mesa Verde National Park for over 100 years according to some folks in the area. Some claim the horses have strayed from the adjoining Ute Mountain tribal lands although the tribe claims no ownership. Wild horses like most wildlife do not recognize ownership boundaries.

Now, Mesa Verde National Park has decided to develop a management plan to control the horse population within the park.

In a scoping letter asking for public comment, the park states, "There are currently between 100-150 trespass horses (trespass and feral are terms used when horse ownership is unknown) in and on the border of the park. Park staff has documented severe impacts to archeological sites, native vegetation, and soils. Trespass livestock has also been documented out-competing native wildlife for water sources and damaging park facilities. There have also been dangerous confrontations reported between trespass livestock and park staff and visitors."

I am curious as to why, all of a sudden the Park Service feels a need to manage these horses who have been around so long. Could it be politically driven? Do they want the horses removed before Secretary of Interior Salazar steps down, and they might (hopefully) have to deal with a more environmentally friendly Secretary of Interior?

I wonder why there has not been an attempt to better protect valuable historical archeological sites not only from horses but also from cattle, elk, deer, bears and the most destructive species of all, the human? Mesa Verde hosted 572,000 visitors in 2011.

I wonder why the park service has not taken steps to secure their boundaries to safeguard these archeological treasures.

As to the threat of horses confronting visitors and staff, according to Paul Morey, Wildlife Biologist at Mesa Verde, "the majority of the horses in the park are already in areas that are not populated by visitors or staff." Therefore the threat to humans should be minimal. The park is also home to black bears, bobcats, coyotes and rattlesnakes who are not being considered for removal.

When it comes to wild horses, federal and state agencies seem to agree that horses need to be managed, controlled, and removed, while other wildlife roams freely. Wild horses become the

scapegoat for all wrongs, despite the fact that they are a native species, they do contribute in a positive way to the natural ecosystem, and unless we stop destroying them they are likely to become extinct.

After reviewing the scoping letter I conclude that mitigating circumstances attributed to the horses can easily be corrected by improving the national park's boundary fence and properly protecting all sensitive archeological sites from wildlife and human damage which should have been done long ago in such a historically rich area. Horses could be lured to less populated areas of the park by installing water tanks where horses are found. Wild horse populations can be controlled by bait trapping and administering PZP a widely used equine birth control. In an area of 52,000 there should be adequate room for all the wildlife, including wild horses.

Horses are protected under the 1971 Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act (WFRHB). Unfortunately, WFRHB "covers horses on BLM and USFS land. The park service does not fall under the act." Perhaps its time for that to change.

The wild horses at Mesa Verde National Park offer the park service the opportunity to take positive, proactive measures that will ultimately lead to a self-sustaining herd and a positive standard that encourages, promotes and protects wild horses, an example that other agencies might learn from. The park would benefit from the wild horses, a positive ecotourism resource.

It should be clear that managing horses in their natural setting far outweighs the alternatives. Current BLM and USFS practices have left fewer than 18,000 wild horses on federal lands, while over 50,000 languish in BLM long and short term feed lots, costing American taxpayers over \$75 million annually.

Change comes hard, especially for governmental agencies entrenched in outdated, unscientific practices funded by special interest groups such as welfare ranchers, mining, oil and gas. Hopefully the park service can be more creative and take positive, environmentally sound steps to rectify the situation at Mesa Verde.

I would hope that citizens would respond to Mesa Verde National Park's scoping letter and suggest improvement of fencing, protection of archeological sites and to leave the horses alone.

To read the scoping letter and make comments please go to: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=79 &projectID=44089&documentID=51386>.

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