

## Grappling with a four-legged overpopulation problem

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun  
Friday, 13 April 2018 09:09

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### Activists seek humane remedies to horse overpopulation problem

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Navajo Nation is seeking solutions to longstanding feral horse grazing issues throughout Navajo land.

It has been somewhat of a rocky road, finding solutions that is.

When activists catch wind of something brewing on the Navajo Nation, such as the authorizing of “horse hunts,” roundups and auctions, and rumors of mass culling, they step into action.

### THERE’S A HISTORY TO THIS AGE-OLD ISSUE

In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed and became the first federal effort to address grazing on the Navajo Nation. In 1937, the tribe adopted the grazing regulations and by 1941, the BIA issued the first grazing permit.

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The Navajo people often refer to this as the great livestock reduction. Many families were upset about having to reduce their herds, including horses.

Since that time, overgrazing and wild horses have negatively impacted tribal rangelands, some of which is now turning into sand dunes.

A recent aerial survey commissioned by the Bureau of Land Management determined that there are 38,000 horses roaming throughout the Navajo Nation.

Derrick Watchman, department manager for the Navajo Department of Agriculture, said the feral horse problem is a well-known struggle that the tribe has worked with since the 1980s.

"The bureau funded an aerial survey that the Navajo Nation administered through Navajo Fish and Wildlife Department," Watchman said. "Thirty-eight thousand is a realistic number (of feral horses) that are out there on Navajo."

Bidtah Becker, executive director of Navajo Division of Natural Resources, directed departments to form a task force to address the feral horses.

"We utilized information from the previous appropriations, roundups and other means of capturing horses. The task force came up with a management plan," Watchman said.

He said the report looked at alternatives other than what had been done previously to capture the wild horses. Much of the information came from the feral horse summit that was conducted about four years ago, he added.

The Department of Agriculture has processed 10,000 head of horses since then, meaning a change of sale occurred.

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“A lot of the horses were sold to horse brokers and ended up in Mexico. There’s a market and need there for use as transport in some of the smaller towns in Mexico,” Watchman said.

The Navajo pony is a smaller horse that meets a different need than what animal activists say is a sale for slaughter horse purposes.

“For slaughterhouses, horses have to be over 750 pounds, ideally over 1,000 pounds to meet the processing costs,” he said.

Most feral horses die from starvation. When they do not get enough food the horses live off body fat and often have very little blood protein.

Locoweed is another problem that causes horses to go crazy and dig up the rangeland with hooves in order to eat the roots of the plant, adding to the deteriorating land condition.

In mid-February, a failed attempt by the Navajo Fish and Wildlife Department to conduct a horse hunt in the Carrizo Mountains near Tiis Nazbas, Ariz. has resulted in negative backlash.

The hunt was to address 60 feral horses in the area. Activists banded together to fight the horse hunt and their efforts proved successful after the event was canceled.

### **NO EASY SOLUTION**

Sharron Berry, co-founder of Indigenous Horse Nation Protection Alliance, fights for what she considers sacred—the Navajo pony.

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“What we are doing (with horses) is being watched by the entire nation, the president, BLM ... we need to make the right decision,” she said.

A recent prayer vigil for the horses in Window Rock brought awareness to the public on the plight of horses on the Navajo Nation.

3H: Humans, Horses & Herds sponsored the event. 3H is a non-profit organization located in Tijeras, N.M.

The equine rescue and sanctuary is working with Berry and others to protect wild horses.

“We released the information on the horse-hunt. We did everything we could to stop it,” she said.

The attempted horse hunt clearly illustrates the need to protect horses Berry said, adding that her horse rescue, Winged Hooves, is ever vigilant for kill buyers. Kill buyers purchase horses for the express purpose of funneling them into the slaughterhouses after auction.

“We’ve all tried, but the feral horse issue on the Navajo Nation is a difficult thing. It’s a very delicate balance,” she said. “We’re willing to educate and help, but we’re not willing to remove horses from the Navajo Nation.”

Combining forces with 3H, Berry said they rescued 56 mares and foals.

“We raised funds for them, rescued them, placed them,” she said.

For now, the delicate balance of prudent activism tempered with daily awareness for all things horses, must be maintained.

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“These horses are a natural resource. They’re a valuable resource. The horses have carried the Navajo people through time beginning,” she said.

### **NAVAJO ADVOCATE FOR HORSES**

In 2014, Leland Grass founded the Diné for Wild Horses and Seminars to train youth, middle age and elder individuals to handle horses with gentleness and dignity.

“Every weekend, I’ve been out there gentling horses,” he said.

Over the course of one weekend, 14 horses were gentled and trained, Grass said, adding that like humans, horses are fast learners.

“Taming horses revolves around the mind and feelings. Horses sense your characteristics, your behavior and who you are,” he said. “They don’t have bad behaviors unless somebody does that to them.”

Grass utilizes harmony and the Navajo Beauty Way when training horses. This involves rubbing the horses, talking to them, and establishing trust. Patience is also required.

“You have to be very patient if he’s spooked. If you end up fighting with (horses) or getting stubborn, you end up losing and that’s what they want. That’s their strategy,” he said.

When it comes to the feral horse issue, Grass said gentling the animals and then selling or adopting the horses out will help reduce the number of horses roaming the range.

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Meanwhile, despite the cancellation of the horse hunt, activists scoff at any sort of complacency.

On a daily basis, Berry and other like-minded folks take to social media in their efforts to generate daily awareness about the plight of horses in the region. They utilize their sources to find out where the “kill pens” might be, and keep tabs on tribal policies that directly impact the roaming horse population.

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