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# Proposal for Wild Horse/Burro Reserve Design as a Solution to Present Crisis

by Craig C. Downer, Wildlife Ecologist



Wild horses from the Rock Creek HMA, where I just observed horses being removed by helicopter and a few PZPed mares placed back.

Unless urgent action is taken, wild horses and burros in today's America face a bleak future. Though the unanimously passed Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 originally set aside somewhere between 53 million and 88 million acres for their preservation in the wild, the rights of these animals and their public supporters have been undermined and denied by the very officials charged with protecting them.

Current policies toward these national heritage species are thinly disguised plans for either bringing their populations to crippling low, non-viable levels or for totally eliminating them from their legal areas. Even if some 30,000 wild horses and burros remain on the public lands (and many think that only 16,000 remain), this figure is in no way commensurate with the amount of ecologically appropriate habitat in which they have the legal right to live.

With our government's current goal to drastically reduce the already tiny wild herds (over 12,000 to be removed in fiscal year 2010) coupled with its emphasis on male-skewed sex ratios and temporary sterilization through PZP injection of mares, our nation's last remaining wild horses and burros find themselves in a survival crisis, indeed, one in many ways more imperiled than in 1971, for their chief enemies reside within the very agencies (BLM & USFS) charged with their protection.

To remedy this intolerable situation, the

people of America must immediately and audaciously respond with a well-conceived plan for change. As a wildlife ecologist and fourth-generation Nevadan personally familiar with the Western wild equids, I now present a way to restore America's wild horses and burros as viable natural herds throughout the West and to eliminate those cruel and disruptive roundups and reproductive manipulations that are only making a mockery of the Act.

Wildlife, wilderness and conservation professionals call this strategy Reserve Design. This combines both ecological and political considerations in order to achieve desirable goals. Basically wild horse/ burro Reserve Design involves the setting aside of areas of wild horse/ burro-containing habitat where human intervention is strictly controlled/ buffered against and where natural processes are allowed to reestablish natural checks and balances. In this way, a significant degree of internal harmony is achieved for all diverse yet interrelated species (including man) within the ecosystem in question.

## Some of the more obvious necessities of Reserve Design are:

- Properly identifying the survival requirements of the principal species to be accommodated in the reserve. In this case we would be promoting a wild horse/ burro-containing ecosystem.
- Identifying appropriate geographical areas suitable for the implementation of wild horse/ burro-containing reserves.
- Incorporating natural barriers that will

limit the ingress and/or the egress of certain species, including the wild horses and burros. This would be for the purposes of avoiding conflicts and setting up conditions for the self-regulation, or self-stabilization of populations, particularly equids.

- Identifying where buffer zones, artificial barriers, or other means of impeding movements in and out of the reserve should be established. These will keep the species in question from coming into conflict. This will include what is termed semi-permeable barriers that do not restrict other species but do prevent equids from passing through. However, well-conceived buffer zones are usually more suitable to produce the desired results.
- Identifying the presence and abundance of necessary food, water, shelter, mineral procurement sites, elevational gradients for seasonal migrations, etc. – factors that will accommodate the long-term needs of viable wild equid populations.
- Identifying geographical regions whose people are well disposed toward the creation and long-term implementation of extensive, ecologically balanced wild horse/ burro-containing reserves.
- Identifying ways of promoting wild equid reserves and of implementing reserve design that will result in win-win relationships centered around the wild horse/ burro reserves. Ecotourism is one major possibility here. Restoring native wild horse/ burro-containing ecosystems, including soils and native species, is another. Also, the reduction of

flammable vegetation through equid grazing and the restoration of hydrographic basins, or water catchment areas, constitute other important, positive consequences of the reserves.

Indeed, the restoration of the “equid element” in North America has a crucial role to play in combating the life-disrupting threats of Global Warming itself. I appreciate your attention and do not hesitate in contacting me concerning this proposal. ☺☺

**About the author:**

Craig C. Downer is a wildlife ecologist who has studied both the wild horses of the West and the endangered Andean tapirs. Many of his diverse writings and speeches concern wild horses, their ecological contribution, their North American evolutionary roots, their great natural and social value, and their survival plight. He is a member of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Species Survival Commission. His book, *Wild Horses: Living Symbols of Freedom* stresses the horse’s need to live freely and naturally and is available from Craig at ccdowner@yahoo.com.

*“Lightning” in freedom back in October in Calico Mountain. He is now held captive.*



## Action Alert

I call upon all who care about America’s wild horses/ burros, their freedom and their future, to promote Reserve Design as a way out of our present predicament. This involves the endless roundups ever more drastic and leaving an aftermath of either empty though still legal herd areas, dysfunctional herds pushed by humanity into a downward spiral to extinction, and many horses held captive and awaiting an uncertain fate. If our senators receive sound convincing reasons from a groundswell of their constituents, positive change can occur and the present, grossly excessive roundups can be stopped. Replacing the current prescription for wild horse/ burro demise will be a benign and well-integrated plan for restoring our wild equids upon their legal and other suitable lands as complete habitats for long-term viable populations following the principles of Reserve Design.

The BLM’s wild horse and burro program must be immediately checked in its policy of overkill and a new directive given to restore these national heritage species throughout the western United States. Having passed the House of Representatives by the sub-

stantial margin of 239 Yea to 185 Nay votes, the *Restore Our American Mustangs* (ROAM) bill must not be permitted to die in the Senate. We must fine tune it, remove any provisions that could backfire on the wild equids and their right to remain free, and with a great sense of urgency move it forth to passage before the present Congress expires. This bill must be revised to include the basic tenets of Reserve Design, as I have already introduced to the staff members of Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana. The ball must now be carried forth more fervidly than before and involving others such as Senator Barbara Boxer who has indicated an interest.

Members of the Subcommittee on Public Lands within the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources must hear from their constituents so as to pass this bill on for full Senate vote. Democratic members of the subcommittee are: Chairman Ron Wyden of Oregon, 202-224-5244; Tim Johnson of S.D, 202-224-5842; Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, 202-224-5824; Maria Cantwell of Washington, 202-224-3441; Robert Menendez of N.J., 202-224-4744; Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, 202-224-4843; Mark Udall of Colorado, 202-224-5941; and Jeanne Shaheen of N.H., 202-224-2841.

Republican subcommittee members include: Ranking Member John Barrasso of Wyoming, 202-224-6441; Jim Risch of Idaho, 202-224-2752; John McCain of Arizona, 202-224-2235; Robert Bennett of Utah, 202-224-5444; Jeff Sessions of Alabama, 202-224-4124; and Bob Corker of Tennessee, 202-224-3344. The full membership of the Committee can be called up at [www.energy.senate.gov](http://www.energy.senate.gov). The office is at Senate Dirksen Bldg. #304; 202-224-4971, fax. 202-224-6163.

Other key senators who should be urged to immediately shape up and pass ROAM are Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, 202-224-3542 and California Senators Barbara Boxer, 202-224-3553 and Dianne Feinstein, 202-224-3841.

*A small band of wild horses in the Calico Mountain herd management area north of Gerlach, Nevada, October 2009*



**Final emphatic note:** The ROAM bill was introduced into the Senate by the Honorable Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia who just passed away on June 28, 2010. He was the longest serving member of the Senate in the history of our nation and an ardent supporter of wild horses, key to the Wild Horse and Burros Act initial passage. It would be a most fitting tribute to this great man to pass the ROAM bill now and truly restore those wonderful healing, life-enhancing presences known as wild horses and burros upon their rightful and America’s vast and wide-open Western lands! ☺☺