

Ethical Considerations Around Horses, Domestic & Feral, & the Morality of Horse Meat

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Society of Range Management – Wild Horse and Burro Conference

Reno, Nevada – November 4, 2009

The History

I have been asked to talk about the ethical considerations around horses. To articulate a moral and ethical framework, it is important to understand the historical facts leading up to this time of dilemma.

In 1880, the United States of America had about 6.9 million horses. Those horses were used for everything from transportation to plowing fields to providing the power to run the machinery of the day. They were also used for food. Some Native American tribes, like the Apache, really didn't use horses for transport all that much...they mostly ate what they caught.

There was no such thing as a “wild horse.” All horses belonged to somebody, and all horses had economic value as transportation, as driving and draft animals, and as a source of food, leather, and byproducts.

By the time of the Great Depression we still had around 7 million horses, and they were used for almost everything, although the automobile was starting to show up, especially in the cities, and reduce the need for horses.

At the height of the Depression, the Federal Government, in its infinite wisdom, decided that the reason that the cattle market was so poor was not because the economy was ruined and nobody had enough money to buy beef...but that there was too many cattle. So, they forced ranchers to sell their cattle, and their sheep to the federal government for \$1 per head, and they dug huge pits, and they drove the cattle into them and they shot them all. They covered it with lye so that no one could use the meat. My grandparents remembered this, and talked about it, and some of yours did, too. It was a scar on their souls for the rest of their lives.

What was the end result? It didn't work, and when World War II broke out, there wasn't enough beef to feed the troops.

Almost simultaneously, John Deere was sweeping the country. With the advent of mechanized machinery there was less and less need for the horses. There was a glut of horses. So what did America do? We did what we always do when faced with a challenge, we used the resources available to us, and we made it work. We sent all the beef we had to the troops, and when that ran out we started using horse meat both at home and abroad. My colleague in the Wyoming Legislature, Rep. Mike Gilmore, remembers that his family ate a lot of horse meat during the War, it was good wholesome meat—high in protein, low in fat—at a price his mother could afford while her husband was fighting overseas. He is far from unusual, if you ask the older folks around you, many will remember this.

After the War, when things started to return to normal, cattlemen moved quickly to regain the market share that they had lost to the government's decimation of their herds, and to the war effort. Their cattle numbers were on the rise, and the overabundance of horses was a serious threat because, of course, there were, as there always are, unscrupulous characters who were taking advantage of the situation.

They were buying up all of these excess horses for literally pennies, passing the meat off as beef, and making a killing.

Most of the cattle industry's effort to regain their primacy was couched in what you might call today a “whisper campaign” ...disparage horse meat as un-tasty, coarse, and unfit for consumption, to play up the servicemen's remembrance of nasty canned meat consumed quickly without culinary enhancement in the trenches of warfare. States like Texas and Illinois actually passed laws around 1948 that banned the consumption of horse meat. In 1948 the issue was not animal rights. It was economics and market share, pure and simple. Why they didn't just make it a crime to be a crook, I don't know? Regardless, that 1948 law is exactly what HSUS/PETA used to shut down the processing plants a few years ago.

All over the country, but particularly here in the West, a common occurrence was happening. At about the same time that the Texas cattlemen were passing laws to ban horse meat, my husband's grandfather decided to move from Colorado and buy a ranch in Ruby Valley, Nevada. He bought an outfit lock, stock and barrel including 200 cows, and 80 head of horses, which were used for saddle horses and for haying teams. All of the ranches in Ruby Valley ran their horse herd together, and they ran the stud bunches in the hills on the other side of the flat. They gathered them all once a year in the Spring—each ranch cut out their own haying teams, kept up the young geldings they wanted to train, culled out any old mares or other undesirables to send to the sale, and they changed the studs every few years so they didn't have a stallion breeding his own daughters. When they finished haying they turned the teams out to fend for themselves until the next Spring.

It was only a few years until all of those ranches in Ruby Valley were putting their hay up with machinery. They simply quit gathering the horses. They didn't need them. They weren't worth the effort to gather and send to the sale.

And that, my friends, is the true evolution of the mustangs in the West. They are no more, and no less, than a feral invasive species allowed to reproduce unchecked by any natural predators or natural controls by our predecessors. As experience has shown, unmanaged horse herds will double in population every four years. We ought to be looking at them the same way we do feral hogs, zebra mussels and kudzu.

Before the Wild Horse Annie bills of the early 1970's there was a small business in gathering or catching those horses that did keep the population somewhat in check. They didn't belong to anybody. They were what is defined under Wyoming law as “estrays” livestock. If you had enough gumption and skill to get out there and gather them, or catch them, you could sell them and make yourself a few dollars. It never made anybody wealthy, but it did provide a way for some to better themselves, and it did provide a way to prevent the horses from reproducing themselves and everything else out of a habitat to live in.

Since then, those of us who live in the West have seen the devastation that a lack of control and management has wrought. Dr. Burkhardt and others have done a great job telling us what has happened in the last 20 years. The BLM is caught between a mandate to protect the range and the resource, and a romantic notion of horses fed by popular literature, animal rights radicals, and Hollywood. Private horse owners, and State and Tribal jurisdictions are all caught in a no-win situation where all of the tools to manage unuseable, unwanted, abandoned, excess horses are being systematically eliminated—a dramatic shift that has taken what used to be a valuable asset, something you could always take to the sale and get cash money for, something of value—and turned it into a very expensive liability with no options—no place to sell them, no place to dispose of them.

Only on the ranches of the West is the horse still used as an everyday tool to make a living. In the minds of many, horses are no longer the multiple purpose livestock they were originally domesticated to be...now most are just pets, or companion animals, or performance horses.

That is the long and the short of the history of horses in the U.S. 6.9 million horses that pulled or carried us and almost all of our freight in 1880. In spite of the use of horses for food in the 1940's and the lack of the need to use horses for anything but pleasure since then, by 1999 there was once again 6.9 million horses in the United States. Now we mostly pull or carry them wherever they go. By 2009 there were 9.8 million horses. Over 10 million horses today. 3 million more horses than we ever needed when we used them for everything.

The Morality

Without our history, we have no way of avoiding the mistakes of the past, nor do we have any basis on which to establish the moral and ethical framework for managing horses.

Morality has three principal meanings. In its first meaning, morality means a code of conduct or belief which is held to be authoritative in matters of right and wrong. For the most part immoral acts are classified as such because they cause harm. In regards to the horse problem, Dr. Terry Whiting, who is the Chair of the Canadian Veterinary Medicine Association's Animal Welfare Committee probably articulates this best in an article he wrote for the Canadian Veterinary Journal:

"In liberal democracies, governments are usually reluctant to limit personal freedom unless there is an objective, demonstrated public good. For example, some human nudity, specifically public nudity, is restricted by statute in Canada and the USA. Private nudity is uncontrolled and the commercialization of nudity in the entertainment industry is only somewhat regulated. Although under certain circumstances nudity is "offensive" to the general public, it is in no way prohibited. I would argue that good laws are written in a way to protect the innocent from injuries that they could not be protected from in the absence of a statute.

Dr. Whiting goes on to say, ***" In application of this principle of liberal democracy to the horse meat discussion; the USA is a major exporter of poultry, pork, and beef products, so the export of other meat is not offensive. Provided horses born in the USA are raised, transported, and slaughtered under conditions similar to those for beef cattle or pigs, in what way is an American injured by Canadians or Europeans or Asians consuming horse meat? If a claim of injury is made, what is the nature and severity of that injury? There is agreement that horse slaughter is offensive to some; however, when is personal offense sufficient cause in a liberal democracy for state enforced prohibition or the use of force to deny personal choice to other citizens? Critics of government typically argue that government should refrain from doing that which individuals are capable of doing for themselves. It is an immense expansion of government powers to extend into the regulation of the average citizen's diet or, apparently, to attempt to alter the diet patterns of other nations."*** (Whiting, 2007)

In its second sense morality refers to an ideal code of belief and conduct, one which would be espoused in preference to other alternatives by the sane "moral" person.

Finally, in its third usage, morality is synonymous with ethics. Ethics being the systematic philosophical study of the moral domain. Ethics seeks to address questions such as how a moral outcome can be achieved in a specific situation, how moral values should be determined, what morals people actually abide by, the fundamental nature of ethics or morality, and how moral capacity or moral

agency develops.

The Ethics

And so we come to the crux of the problem. What is right? What is wrong? How do we achieve a moral outcome when the ethical path to a resolution of the horse problem is so often obfuscated by blatant emotional manipulation for purposes of creating drama and raising dollars? We need to meet this head on, with clear thinking, and obvious, unequivocal conviction.

Socrates thought that people will naturally do what is good, if they know what is right.

Aristotle, on the other hand, encouraged moderation and saw extremes as degraded and immoral. For example, courage is the moderate virtue between the extremes of cowardice and recklessness. Man should not simply live, but live well with conduct governed by moderate virtue. Moderate virtue is difficult—it denotes doing the right thing, to the right person, at the right time, to the proper extent, in the correct fashion, for the right reason.

So, let us seek that moderate path in regards to the management of horses. With open hearts, and clear minds let us determine what is the right way to ethically manage the land, the people, the wildlife, and the horses.

Let us tackle the toughest question first. Is it moral for human beings to eat horses? I contend that it is, and that those who argue otherwise represent one of Aristotle's degraded and immoral extremes. Here are my reasons:

1. Human beings have evolved as meat eaters. We have eyes in the front of our heads to hunt, and teeth in our mouths designed to tear and chew meat. We can survive, and be healthy on a diet of nothing but meat, while a totally vegan diet—a diet that includes absolutely no animal protein whatsoever—requires not only total dedication and knowledge of exactly what, when, and how to eat, but for long-term health requires synthetics that replace essential nutrients that can only be found in animal products. No society on earth is now, or ever has been completely vegan, for obvious reasons. Those primarily vegetarian societies that come the closest have the shortest lifespans, and the least robust bodies on the planet. On the other hand, the only two mammals in the world that cannot survive on vegetable protein alone, their systems simply do not have the ability to assimilate vegetable protein, are Eskimos and cats. The aboriginal people of the far North before white men and white flour lived on a diet that consisted of practically nothing but whale blubber and fish for most of the year. Archeological evidence proves they lived long healthy lives with strong bones and good teeth. I think that I am more closely related to Eskimos, than herbivores.
2. These are physical facts which cannot be denied. If you are an adult human being who believes that it is immoral to exploit animals for any purpose, and therefore live a completely vegan lifestyle—I can respect that position, and wish you godspeed. If you choose to destroy your health, survive on fake food and manufactured nutrients, and cloak yourself in unsustainable petroleum derived clothing...so be it, it is still a free country. But, if you are working to impose that unnatural and unhealthy lifestyle on others; if you are endangering the lives and health of young children and babies who need animal protein to develop their brains—then I say that you have stepped far over the line and are pursuing a degraded, unethical, immoral objective.
3. Our laws and generally accepted practices agree that it is moral and ethical for human beings to keep livestock, and that it is our responsibility as livestock owners to ensure that they have adequate feed and water to sustain life. A central tenet of providing for livestock is that when

slaughtering them for food, that they be killed as quickly and painlessly as possible. This is not only a moral and spiritual imperative, but a quality and economic consideration, as a stressed animal will have a system full of adrenaline, and the meat will be tough and flavorless.

4. There are moral and ethical considerations around wildlife and their use and management, as much or more so as there are around livestock. If you are hunting and you wound an animal, you must track them and kill them rather than allow them to suffer a long and painful death. It is best to be skillful and sure of your weapon in order to kill quickly and painlessly, for exactly the same moral and quality of meat purposes as for livestock. Ask any proficient hunter why their inept counterpart's meat is so “gamey” and awful...they'll be quick to tell you that flavor and tenderness are the result of a clean kill, and in how the meat is handled.
5. It is immoral and unethical for any jurisdiction to allow any particular species to become so overpopulated that they destroy the ecosystem. For this reason, every jurisdiction that manages wildlife monitors the interaction of all species of plants, predators, and prey, the condition of the land, the availability of water, the potential for erosion, and the destruction of invasive species with no natural enemies. In terms of animals, they all utilize lethal means to control populations when necessary—hunting seasons, predator and pest controls, invasive species eradication efforts.
6. Horses need to be considered in the same context. The idea that horses are somehow special, or exempt, from this management, is ludicrous and unsupportable. The idea that the American taxpayer must be responsible for paying for a welfare entitlement program so that every last feral and domestic horse born can live out its 30 or more years of natural life on government supported old horse homes is the most immoral, unethical, and unjust proposition I have ever heard...and yet, that is exactly what is being proposed by our Secretary of Interior in regards to the Bureau of Land Management horses.
7. The costs to taxpayers are staggering. By the BLM's own estimation, they spend an average of \$15,000 per horse over a horse's lifetime in capture and holding costs. In Fiscal Year 2007, the BLM spent \$38.8 million on its wild horse and burro program; the cost for holding wild horses and burros in short and long term facilities was \$21.0 million, meaning holding costs accounted for more than half of the BLM's total program. This level of funding is not sufficient to support necessary removals from the range while maintaining lifetime holding for older unadoptable animals. To continue its current removal, holding, and restrictive sales practices, the BLM is going to need at least \$85 million in 2012.
8. The reasons put forward for the extraordinary treatment of horses? Horses are pets, companions, and sporting animals...they are not livestock. Americans don't eat horses, and we shouldn't be supplying those who do. Horses are a spiritual icon of the West and our heritage. It is cruel and inhumane to slaughter a horse. Let's address these one by one:
 - Some horses are pets, companions, and sporting animals. If the owner chooses, they have every right do determine how, and under what circumstances that horse is put out of its misery, and how to respectfully dispose of, or utilize, the carcass.
 - Horses are also multiple purpose livestock who are seen as an ordinary food animal by most of the cultures in the world, including many who live in the United States. Americans ate a lot of horse meat during and after World War II; you can still find horse sausage in some Mom and Pop Scandinavian butcher shops in the upper Midwest; crooks are butchering other peoples' horses in south Florida and selling it out of coolers on the street for black market prices; cultures like the Tongan population in Salt Lake City prize horse meat; and young, single Moms like my daughter who are struggling to raise healthy kids on limited

resources would welcome the availability of an affordable, delicious meat that has 40% more protein and 50% less fat than beef.

- China consumes the most horse meat in the world at 100 million tons per year, with Mexico close behind. In Europe, Italy consumes the most followed closely by the Scandinavian countries, Belgium and France. You can find horse in the meat cases at both ends of Canada in Quebec and Vancouver. Here in the United States we are contemplating making it a felony to transport a horse for the purpose of human food; in clear disrespect for the culinary traditions and cultural attitudes of other nations; and to put off limits a vast, renewable source of wholesome, high quality protein when more than 10 million people a year are literally dying from malnutrition around the world. How ethical is that?
 - And finally, the clincher...the simple fact of butchering a horse for food is cruel and inhumane. Regardless of the long-standing humane methods of slaughter legislation, and universal government inspection of meat processing plants. Regardless of the handling of live animals, the veterinarian approved methods of killing. Regardless of the fact that once death has occurred—quickly, and as painlessly and stress-free as possible—all sensation ends, and that what happens to the carcass is no longer an issue of animal welfare. Regardless of all of this, there is a very vociferous, well financed, and heavily orchestrated effort to legally establish that the simple fact of killing a horse for human food is cruel and inhumane in and of itself. If they can legally establish this, then those of us who make a living with livestock know that it is easy to assert that all animal agriculture is cruel and inhumane, and to destroy our way of being and our culture utterly and completely...and that is exactly what HSUS/PETA has said is their ultimate objective.
8. As you all know, HSUS/PETA efforts have successfully shut down the remaining three horse processing plants in the United States. Their efforts have prevented the BLM from doing what needs to be done to control the over-population of feral horses on Western rangelands. None of these animal rights initiatives offer any solutions to the inevitable glut of unwanted, excess horses. With no US market, the only horses that have any value whatsoever are those who are big enough and healthy enough to be worth the trucking to the only market for low-end horses we have left in Canada and Mexico. With no US market there is no option for horse owners who can no longer afford to keep a horse, or who need or want to access the residual value of an unusable horse. The result? An explosion of abandoned and neglected horses nation-wide, an absolute disaster of suffering, starvation, and disease, and no viable solution to the problem without re-establishing the domestic market. Out here in the West it is easy to just dump them out on public or tribal lands. Back East they turn them out in the roads, and people are hitting them with cars. Slowly the general population is starting to understand that there might be more to this story than the over-hyped manipulated video segments, and over-emotional and outrageous tirades and fabrications of media trained mouthpieces would have us believe. If you have any suspicion at all that this is not happening, please visit the website of a millionhorses.com or abandonedhorses.net and take a look at the new stories and studies that document the scope of the carnage nationwide.

Conclusion

So, where is the ethical and moral middle ground that Aristotle would have us seek? I suggest that at a minimum it would contain these few elements, all of which are articulated in the Core Principles upon which we founded the United Organizations of the Horse. These Core Principles guide all of our

activity. Our lead sponsor, Rep. Leonard Boswell of Iowa and his co-sponsors will shortly introduce the Humane and Optimal Restoration and Sustainability of Equines Act, the HORSE Act. In part, because of our efforts, Congress is asking for a GAO study of the impact of the closing of the plants on the welfare of the horses, themselves, and the economic impact on farm income. That report is due on March 1st, and we anticipate hearings around the HORSE Act at about the same time. At the United Organizations of the Horse we are developing industry driven programs such as a National Do Not Slaughter Registry to protect the rights and the interests of those horse owners who never want to see their horse slaughtered. We are also developing a United Organizations of the Horse Quality Assurance Program to minimize transportation risks, bruising and injury of horses bound for slaughter, to ensure that live animals are handled appropriately, and that the meat is safe and free of harmful drug residues. We are working to remove the regulatory roadblocks to a processing plant opening in many of the 45 states that do not have a ban on horse meat.

In terms of the BLM horse problem, one of our guiding principles is that horse numbers be strictly controlled so that we have a sustainable population of wild horses on public lands for our children and grandchildren to appreciate. Most of you are very aware of the GAO study that came out last year that clearly pointed out the flawed methodology currently used by the BLM, and the challenges they face in appropriately managing the horses in relationship to a multiple-use mandate that does not allow for the primacy of a single invasive species over the well-being of all other native wildlife, or responsible use of a renewable resource for the production of livestock, the only way we have of converting grass and water into human food on un-farmable land. Therefore, our position is that the population must be adequately controlled to ensure sustainability, and that no horse should ever be held captive off of the public lands for longer than 90 days. Period. If they cannot be adopted, or otherwise disposed of within that period, then they must be sold to the highest bidder without recourse, and all proceeds returned to better manage the wild populations and the resource base.

Bottom line, if a horse cannot be used for some other purpose, or is not wanted as a pet, then the highest, best use of that animal is to provide healthy, wholesome food to sustain somebody, or something.

To suggest that we should ignore the degradation of the environment, and allow them to multiply to the point that they are starving themselves and every other living thing on the land as being the natural way of things is the most immoral outrage I can imagine...to condemn that many horses, all of that wildlife—elk, deer, rabbits, turkeys, bighorn sheep, and all the rest—endangered and otherwise to a long, slow, agonizing death of starvation and disease...unforgiveable!

Every jurisdiction in the country does their best to control populations of animals. Wildlife managers resort to intensified hunting seasons, predator controls, extreme measures when necessary. Cities, towns, and counties don't allow feral dogs and cats to get out of control, and euthanize them humanely when they are not adoptable or wanted. To suggest that it is the government's role, and the taxpayer's responsibility to support every excess, unwanted, unuseable horse for as long as they shall live, regardless of the cost...ridiculous!

Disposing of a 1000 lb. horse carcass is more of a challenge than a dog or a cat. To suggest that it is more moral to kill nearly 200,000 wild and domestic horses a year with toxic drugs that if left in the open will kill any scavenger that feeds on the carcass, if buried will leach into water tables, cannot even be rendered into useful by-products, or composted, because of toxic residues—to suggest that this is somehow more moral than feeding someone, or something...horrific!

Our founding fathers had a keen appreciation of the central role of private property in social life. Just as a strong view of the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion is necessary to serve fundamental constitutional values, so, too, is a strong view of private property in a free and democratic society.

Private property rights include exclusive rights of possession, use, and disposition, and our legal system includes effective systems to record title and to transfer ownership. No one disputes that all domestic animals are private property. To deprive horse owners of options in terms of access to a viable market, or to try and legally determine which animals people can eat based purely on the spurious social and cultural attitudes of a few...unconscionable and unprecedented!

My personal morality says that it is an unethical waste of a massive amount of healthy, nutritious meat that would otherwise be welcomed by a world wide market, and an unconstitutional infringement upon my rights as a horse owner to be deprived of that viable market in order to make a living, to maximize my investment in all classes of livestock, or to even enjoy the nourishment of the meat itself if I choose. As a legislator, and a citizen, I hold the Wyoming State Constitution very close to my heart, and it guides every action I take, and it says, "nowhere in a Republic does absolute, arbitrary power over the lives, liberty, or property of free men exist, not even in the largest majority."

We know what is right and what is wrong. We cannot allow that certainty to be subverted. We cannot allow special interests to draw ourselves and our wild and domestic horses into this unmanageable morass. We cannot allow the devastation of our land and environment by political decisions, rather than sound science and good stewardship. We cannot allow the annihilation of our culture, our traditional ways of living and being with animals, the threat to our health, well-being, and generations to come.

In the end, all we can do...what we must do...is to strive for that courageous moderate way that Aristotle espoused, to protect our rights, our land, our people, and our animals...to do what Socrates advised...to do what we know is right, and to be happy.