

their Opinion

Wild horses epitomize the Badlands

BISMARCK – The wild horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park are exquisite, rivaling with the bison for the spirit of the place and eclipsing the majestic elk in sheer intelligence and beauty.

What may be the last roundup of TR wild horses will be held this fall, and 90 animals will be sold at auction Oct. 23.

The 2009 roundup marks a change for the better in the management of the wild horse herd.

A roundup-auction strategy has been used to cull the herd, keeping wild horse numbers under control. There now are about 165 wild horses in the park, and the ideal number falls somewhere between 60 and 90 horses.

Unfortunately, the roundup in very difficult terrains has been forced to rely on helicopters, and the result has been expensive and has meant a high degree of stress for the horses – as well as the pilots.

A similar but more difficult situation exists for the elk in the park. Elk numbers are nearing 1,000, culling needs to be more extreme, birth control has been discarded as an effective option, and chronic wasting disease and restrictions on moving elk across state lines limit the benefits of roundup and redistribution.

With the elk, volunteer and professional hunters are expected to be used to reduce the population, an unaccepted option for reducing horse numbers.

The National Park Service's management of horses in TR park will begin to experiment with birth control. During the roundup, a new contraceptive vaccine will be administered to about 25 mares and a like number of nonvaccinated mares will be a control group. The vaccine can be administered with a dart gun.

It's easy to think of the national park as a wild place where animals and plants should be left to nature, but when it comes to bison, elk and horses, there's not enough space – grass and water – for unlimited numbers.

The NPS must manage the wildlife in the park, for the sake of the animals as well as the habitat. Too many bison, horses or elk mean overgrazing, as serious an issue in the park as it would be with cattle on a ranch. The marginal grazing in the Badlands makes overuse an intense issue.

TR park needs to bring its numbers of large grazing animals down in line with what the thin vegetation can support.

The horses from the roundup will be auctioned Oct. 23 at Stockmen's Livestock in Dickinson, N.D. The market for horses has been very soft, but let's hope the unique nature of the wild horses will draw a strong bidding crowd, one made up of people capable of taking home a spirited animal.

– **The Bismarck Tribune**