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Discussion Document  
Feral (Wild) Horse Management<sup>1</sup>  
Theodore Roosevelt National Park

**Issue:** Since the 1994 wild horse roundup there have been two proposals to re-introduce specific types of horses into the park to change or augment the type of wild horse roaming within the South Unit (S.U.), Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

**NPS Policy Guidance:** The NPS Management Policies provide direction for managing exotics.<sup>2</sup> Generally, the reintroduction of exotics is not permitted in natural zones (Chapter 4, page 11). Exotics that were present when the park was established may remain if they have almost no impact on native resources or can not be successfully controlled (Chapter 4, page 12). See Appendix C for complete policy statement on management of exotics.

**Brief Background:** When the park was established in 1947, wild horses roamed in the S.U. and when it was fenced in 1956-57, wild horses were included within the S.U. (The Elkhorn and North Units did not have any wild horses within the boundaries when those units were established.) After several years of unsuccessfully trying to eradicate the wild horses and because of increasing public support for keeping the horses, the park decided in 1970 to manage the horses as an historical demonstration herd.

**Current Status of Wild Horse Herd:** As of November 1996, the park has approximately 90 wild horses running in approximately six bands and several loose bachelor stallion groups. Genetic testing of blood from the wild horses caught during the 1991 and 1994 roundups, opinions from a conformation expert, extensive observational data and detailed lineage information from rancher Tom Tescher, MSU's ecological report on wild horse, and an historical research project have given the park more information on the wild horses.<sup>3</sup>

From the above information it is determined that the park has a herd that resembles the "old ranch style" horse that was typical of horses found on ranches in the badlands during the 1940s. Starting with the 1991 and 1994 roundup the park staff began culling the horse herd to preserve the "old ranch style" characteristics.

**Current Management Actions:** A management plan was approved in 1970, when the decision was made to manage the wild horses because of their historical ties to the Theodore Roosevelt ranching scene.<sup>4</sup> Since that time the horses have been managed under this plan with modifications made through the Resource Management Plan, memos and letters.

The original intent was to manage the herd with the guidance that "a horse is a horse." This direction was established under the premise that since the wild horses are an historical demonstration herd, any horse could represent the symbolism of the wild horse present during Theodore Roosevelt's time. Consequently horses were culled using judgment from park staff and local ranchers on what they thought represented a "good" horse to have running wild. Stallions and mares have been intentionally

introduced or have escaped from private ranchers and joined a park band. The introductions were made into the park during 1981 and 1982, because of a concern of inbreeding with the herd. Decisions on culling and introductions were based on the best current information, some of which provided for conflicting management over the years. Refer to Appendix B, Summary of Significant Events and Population with Feral (Wild) Horse Program.

#### **Concerns with Current Management Program:**

1. There is not one document that provides specific direction for the wild horse program.
2. The program does not provide specific direction that has evolved with public input on what "type" or breed of horse to manage for and perpetuate in the South Unit
3. While the wild horse program recognizes carrying capacity limits and establishes a population range from 50 to 90 animals, carrying capacity is based on range and climatic conditions and does not reflect the logistical, operational and financial constraints associated with roundups.
4. The park does not have a fully integrated ungulate management program that considers the wild horse program along with the management of native wildlife nor a program that establishes which animal program becomes dominant if there is a conflict between species or periods of extreme drought. Current actions do not recognize that horses can have major impacts on the park's natural and cultural resources.
5. The park needs to better address the lack of resources (staffing and funding) necessary to manage an intensive wildlife program that involves seven large ungulate species.

**Proposals for introducing specific horses to park:** Over the years there have been several suggestions about introducing specific horses or breeds to the park. (See Appendix B.) Recently, in late 1994, Tom Tescher discussed with Chief Ranger Jay Liggett the possibilities of introducing a bucking-horse type of animal to the population. Since the genetic testing did not show a concern for inbreeding this proposal was tabled.

In 1996, Leo and Frank Kuntz approached the park about returning approximately 30 horses they had purchased at the various park's surplus horse auctions. This proposal was aired on an ABC News special on June 27, 1996. Since that time, the Andrea and Norman Jr. Waitt Foundation (A&NWF) has met with the Kuntzs' and are suggesting A&NWF could provide a trust fund that would pay for the park's wild horse program, if the park accepted the Kuntzs' 30 horses. The Kuntzs' believe these specific 30 horses have a consistent conformation matching the conformation exhibited by the true Spanish mustang.<sup>5</sup>

**Management's Concerns over introducing horses into the park:** The current suggestions associated with bringing horses into the park are largely an external controversy. While refinements need to be made to the written horse management program, the park is essentially happy with the current management of the horses since this program meets the general public's desires and has cost-effective practices. With the 1991 and 1994 roundups, horses that were offspring of the previously introduced stallions were culled from the herd. The present management strategy is to maintain the "old ranch style" breed -- the dominant breed present within the herd.

There are several concerns that need addressed prior to introducing or returning any horses to the park whether we are discussing the Kuntzs' proposal or any other proposal:

1. Does the objectives of the horse owners wishing to introduce horses meet the park's objectives for managing an historical demonstration herd.
2. Does introducing horses compromise the future management of the park horses. Is the introduction necessary or appropriate.
3. Is there a need for environmental or cultural compliance and ethnographic consultation prior to making the decision to allow horses to enter the park. Should the park get public input into this decision process.
4. Will the reintroduction of horses bring any chances of introducing disease into the park horse herd or other park wildlife.
5. How will the genetics of the entering horse(s) interact with the genetics of the park herd. If the genetics match, why introduce genetically identical horses.
6. Should the park be managing the horses based on genetics or conformation, and if the latter, how do we decide what the horses should "look" like.
7. If the introduction of horses require planning and a revised management plan or more active management in the field, does the park have the resources to plan and properly manage the horses, realizing their management must be integrated into the management of other species.
8. A wild horse only appears to be wild if it runs or moves away from people. Horses brought into the park may have been fed by humans and consequently would start begging food from park visitors and thus, not meet the behavior desired.

#### **Specific concerns with the Kuntzs' proposal:**

9. If 30 horses exhibiting characteristics of the Spanish mustang are introduced to the S.U. horses typifying the "old ranch style", will this action dilute both breeds to the point neither is unique, significant or special.

10. If the 30 horses are introduced, what happens to the 30 park horses that need to be immediately culled from the park herd to stay within the established carrying capacity.

11. Eventually the introduced horses or their offspring will have to be culled. What does the park do with these culled horses.

12. With the horses being returned to the park, what assurances are there that all the horses came from the park and are not the offspring from "outside" horses that may have hidden, "non-desired" characteristics or genes.

13. What is the age and reproductive capability of the horses being returned.

14. If horses are taken back, does this establish a precedence that the park will need to take back other surplus horses from owners that are no longer financially able to care for their horses.

15. Is the National Park Service the best institution to manage or perpetuate either the Spanish mustang or potential offspring of Sitting Bull's ponies. Is the perpetuation of the Spanish mustang or Sitting Bull's ponies an issue for Federal government involvement. If the park accepts these horses, will the Sioux Nation, using earlier information from the Kuntzs', claim the horses and ask for their return to one of the Sioux reservations.

**Potential Solutions:** Following are potential solutions that might address the concerns of the existing wild horse management actions and the additional concerns expressed above. This list is not inclusive and will be modified as more information becomes available.<sup>6</sup>

- Determine that the current wild horse management program meets the park's objectives and consequently decide that no action is necessary at this time.
- As part of the management plan process, hold a symposium of technical experts to help the park staff develop a revised wild horse management program, realizing that results must be a) consistent with NPS policies; b) be compatible with other ungulates; c) within the resources the park has available to implement the program; and d) reflect the vegetative management situations.<sup>7</sup>
- Find funding to a) establish permanent resource specialist with experience in range ecology and/or wildlife and b) complete recurring ungulate management projects, i.e. boundary fence maintenance, spring rehabilitation and development, exotic plant control in key critical sites, vegetative transects, aerial census, etc. Total yearly funding to cover the salary and support costs plus the recurring management projects is estimated at \$152,300 (1997 dollars). (For detailed breakdown, see Appendix A.)

- Until a symposium is completed and a wild horse management plan is approved to provide long-term direction, establish interim procedures to address any proposal for introducing or returning horses to the South Unit. These interim procedures might include:
  - Continue with necessary culling of surplus animals using roundups that follow the 1994 roundup procedures and any new genetic or historical information.
  - Listen to proposals for bringing horses into the park and ask that the proposal be in writing with all conditions and details specified. Within 45 days of the receipt of the written proposal, respond in writing clearly stating the intent of the park.<sup>8</sup>
  - Require blood work on any potential entering horse(s) to include genetic analysis that meets or exceeds the standards and procedures developed and used by the park.
  - Not consider any horse with genetic markers or conformation that conflicts or is significantly different from the type currently being preserved in the park herd.
  - Continue to use the carrying capacity guideline of 50 to 90 horses until research gives better data for revising the number.
  - Actively seek base funding increases or funding from other sources to provide resources detailed in Appendix A.



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## ENDNOTES

1 Within the NPS, domesticated animals that have reverted back to running wild are referred to as feral animals. However, this document will follow popular terminology and refer to the horses within the South Unit as wild horses.

2 Exotic animals are defined by the NPS to be those that occur in a given place as a result of direct or indirect, deliberate or accidental actions by humans. The exotic species introduced because of such human action would not have evolved with the species native to the place in question and, therefore, would not be a natural component of the ecological system characteristic of that place.

3 For genetic work refer to University of Kentucky reports by Dr. E. Gus Cothran dated 7/10/92 and 3/30/95. For description of the conformation of park horses refer to letter from Dr. D. Phillip Sponenberg dated 10/12/94. Refer to 6/92 report from MSU for ecological information on horse herd. For historical information, read Castle McLaughlin's report entitled "*The History and Status of the Wild Horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park* dated 12/89 (summary at Appendix B).

4 When Theodore Roosevelt lived near Medora during the 1880s, he wrote "In a great many--indeed, in most--localities there are wild horses to be found,...being either themselves runaways from some ranch or Indian outfit, or claiming such for their sires and dams, yet are quite as wild as the antelope on whose domain they have intruded."

Information that has just recently been found state that in 1888 Nick & John Buttelman brought 1000 mares into the badlands and two years later brought in another 1000 mares (Marie MacDonald's history of Glendive) and in 1906, William McCarty, Dickinson, purchased approximately 2000 horses in Eastern Washington and brought them via railroad into the badlands (The Last Grand Roundup by AA McIntyre).

Other re-introductions within the park include: In 1967, after considerable public pressure, the park introduced an exotic species, Longhorn steers, in the North Unit (N.U.) to commemorate the trail drives and, in particular the Long X Trail Drive Route that traversed the N.U. The steers restrict themselves to the sagebrush flat area of approximately 750 acres immediately west of the visitor center. This introduction complied with the NPS Management Policies, since the area was being managed as an historical park until 1978.

Native species have been re-introduced into the park at various times: Pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*) in 1951, (*Bison bison*) in 1956, elk (*Cervus elaphus*) in 1985, and bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis californiana*) in 1996 - a close living relative to the *Ovis canadensis auduboni* that was extirpated from North Dakota in the early 1900s. (The ND Game and Fish had already introduced the California bighorn into the badlands prior to the park's 1996 introduction.)

5 Over time the Kuntzs' have referred to these horses as Sitting Bull ponies, Nakota breed, old-line horses and most recently as directly related to the Spanish mustangs.

6 It should be noted that the park's Resource Management Plan has 25 resource issues that are prioritized and of tantamount importance to park management. Wild horse management is listed among 48 other un-ranked issues after the first 25 project statements.

7 The invasion of leafy spurge, an exotic plant, has displaced many native plants and is causing significant ecological impacts to the habitat occupied by all the park's ungulate species.

8 May require Midwest Region or Washington Office review.