Are Wild Horses Really Wild?
By Deb Baumann (as published in The Equestrian News, June 2006)

Are America’s wild horses truly “wild” or are they merely “feral”…?

For those who believe that only indigenous species have a place on our public lands, the distinction is critical. Core to the conflict is the debate over “wild” (i.e. native) verses “feral” (i.e. an alien species which escaped confinement).

For too long, wild horses have been decried as “non-native” species. Thanks to testimony given before Congress by Jay F. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D. and Patricia M. Fazio, Ph.D, we have new scientific evidence and understanding upon which to base our defense of wild horses and burros’ right to range America’s wild lands.

According to Kirkpatrick and Fazio, modern horses (Equus caballus), should be considered North American native wildlife. Evidence documents the dispersal of Equus from North America to Eurasia approximately 2-3 million years ago. Additional migrations to Asia and return migrations back to North America occurred over time. Between 13,000 and 11,000 years ago, Equus caballus disappeared from North America. In 1493, on Columbus’ second voyage to the Americas, Spanish horses were brought back to North America. They thrived in the old stomping grounds their species was born in and their immediate ancestors had called HOME.

Critics of wild horses assert that the species introduced by the Spanish was different from that which disappeared 13,000 to 11,000 years before. However, the relatively new field of molecular biology has recently found that the modern horse is genetically equivalent to the most recent Equus species in North America prior to extinction.

According to Kirkpatrick and Fazio, “The molecular biology evidence is incontrovertible and indisputable. The fact that horses were domesticated before they were reintroduced matters little from a biological viewpoint. They are the same species that originated here.”

The key element in describing an animal as a native species is (1) where it originated; and (2) whether or not it co-evolved with its habitat. Clearly, Equus caballus did both, here in North America.

Designations of non-native, feral, or exotic are used as an excuse to remove animals which have no commercial value to ranchers or hunters. A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but calling this rose “feral” instead of “wild” condemns a true native species to second-class status, and worse.

Native status for wild horses would place these animals, under law, within a new category for management considerations. They deserve the same respect and protections given other native wildlife.

That’s good news for the horses, but it’s also great news for the land itself.

Many of the other native grazing species (elk, deer, bison, wild sheep) have all but disappeared from the American landscape. Evolving over millions of years in harmony with the native flora and fauna, such species play a critical role in ecosystem balance. Now that the others are mostly gone, it falls upon our hardy, resilient bands of wild horses to perform a valuable role keeping grass and other brush under control, which in turn reduces danger from wildfires as well as providing a necessary service in the natural order and balance of America’s wild ecosystems.

This article is based upon a statement written by Jay F. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D. and Patricia M. Fazio, Ph.D., delivered to the 109th Congress in support of H.R. 297 (to restore the prohibition on the commercial sale and slaughter of wild free-roaming horses and burros) on January 25, 2005. The complete statement is attached.
Finally, the work of Hofreiter et al., 5 examining the genetics of the so-called E. lambei from the permafrost of Alaska, found that the variation was within that of modern horses, which translates into E. lambei actually being E. caballus, genetically. The molecular biology evidence is incontrovertible and indisputable. The fact that horses were domesticated before they were reintroduced matters little from a biological viewpoint. They are the same species that originated here, and whether or not they were domesticated is quite irrelevant. Domestication altered little biology, and we can see that in the phenomenon called “going wild,” where wild horses revert to ancient behavioral patterns. James Dean Feist dubbed this “social conservation” in his paper on behavior patterns and communication in the Pryor Mountain wild horses. The reemergence of primitive behaviors, resembling those of the plains zebra, indicated to him the shallowness of domestication in horses.6

The issue of feralization and the use of the word “feral” is a human construct that has little biological meaning except in transitory behavior, usually forced on the animal in some manner. Consider this parallel. E. Przewalski (Mongolian wild horse) disappeared from Mongolia a hundred years ago. It has survived since then in zoos. That is not domestication in the classic sense, but it is captivity, with keepers providing food and veterinarians providing health care. Then they were released a few years back and now repopulate their native range in Mongolia. Are they a reintroduced native species or not? And what is the difference between them and E. caballus in North America, except for the time frame and degree of captivity?

The key element in describing an animal as a native species is (1) where it originated; and (2) whether or not it co-evolved with its habitat. Clearly, E. caballus did both, here in North America. There might be arguments about “breeds,” but there are no scientific grounds for arguments about “species.” The non-native, feral, and exotic designations given by agencies are not merely reflections of their failure to understand modern science, but also a reflection of their desire to preserve old ways of thinking to keep alive the conflict between a species (wild horses) with no economic value anymore (by law) and the economic value of commercial livestock. Native status for wild horses would place these animals, under law, within a new category for management considerations. As a form of wildlife, embedded with wildness, ancient behavioral patterns, and the morphology and biology of a sensitive prey species, they may finally be released from the “livestock-goneloose” appellation.

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