

The Back Page

The back page is a new feature of *Human–Wildlife Interactions* to offer our authors and readers the opportunity to present insights, experiences, thoughts, and concerns about contemporary and emerging wildlife management or human–wildlife topics. Based on its position in the journal, it is much like the last speaker’s presentation before lunch or the end of the day at a conference—the only thing standing between lunch or dinner. Any conference coordinator worth their salt as an organizer will schedule the most colorful or well-known speaker or hottest topic for this slot, hoping to keep the audience in their seats, if not at the edge of them. As I am neither colorful nor well known, my hope is the topic will achieve the latter.

Management or emotions—what do the people think?

Terry A. Messmer, Editor-in-Chief, Human–Wildlife Interactions, and Director, Berryman Institute

OVER THE LAST several months, I have participated on a national steering committee that organized and conducted the National Wild Horse and Burro (WHB) Summit. The Summit was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, August 22–24, 2017. My role was to put together a program that reviewed the role of science in WHB policies and management. The program was designed to inform and educate an audience that expressed an interest in WHB management and a concern that status quo management wasn’t working. Attendees represented a wide and diverse audience of >100 groups, organizations, and agencies, including representatives of horse advocacy groups.

Although wild horses and burros are technically feral (i.e., re-introduced to North America and thus not considered wildlife by many), the classical definition of wildlife management still has some applicability in that horses and burros are to be managed to achieve the desires of humans. Human desires reflect human values, which form our perceptions and attitudes, and also fuel our emotions. The values, perceptions, and attitudes regarding WHBs and their management are diverse, but the emotional attachment to this single issue may be unprecedented in the annals of the management of these animals.

Prior, during, and subsequent to the Summit, I have received e-mails, phone calls, tweets, etc., from people I do not know, but they know of me and my role in the Summit. The authors of these emotional messages mention nothing about the 1971 WHB Act or the need to manage WHB, but rather assail my professional character and even accuse me of advocating disposing of wildlife and selling public lands. Their arguments seem to be based on an assertion that >80% of Americans support wild-ranging WHBs. Based on a survey conducted of Summit participants, >99% expressed similar strong support for sustaining wild-roaming WHBs. So, what is the problem?

A few years ago, the Berryman Institute, in response to increasing negative concerns in the media about the management of predators, surveyed a random sample of United States households to assess public attitudes and beliefs about the management of medium-sized predators to enhance avian recruitment. The results of this survey were subsequently published in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin* (<<http://www.berrymaninstitute.org/pages/publicationsbeginning2017/MessmerEtAl1999AttitudesPredators.pdf>>).

Respondents expressed moderately knowledgeable but somewhat idealized beliefs about predator ecology. Although we found strong support for predators’ right to exist, respondents did not support an outright ban on predator hunting or trapping. When given specific predator control scenarios, respondents supported control to enhance avian recruitment, except when controlling raptors to protect upland gamebirds. Support for control was greater when prey species were threatened and when the predator species were less charismatic. Our results suggested that the interested public may support predator control more readily when it is used within a management context. I suspect the American public would express similar perceptions, recognizing the need for management while protecting WHBs. The Bureau of Land Management is currently planning to conduct a national survey of the public regarding WHB management, which should shed new light on this issue if conducted with sufficient rigor for publication in a peer-reviewed context. However, emotions surrounding the issue of WHBs may drown its message in the political marketplace.

Wildlife managers cannot and must not ignore the emotions surrounding the management of wildlife and other animals such as WHBs. But they must also be willing and have the capabilities to manage the species or animals they have been given the responsibility to manage.