

Letter from the Editor

“For the want of a horse the rider was lost”



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, in *“Poor Richard’s Almanac,”* included his rendition of the proverb, “For want of a nail.” The proverb reads something like this—

*For the want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For the want of a rider the battle was lost,
For the want of a battle the kingdom was lost.*

Over time, this proverb has been printed in many versions. Regardless of the version, it describes a series of unfortunate circumstances that resulted because of the failure to anticipate the outcomes of an initial action, or to take the required corrective actions when a problem was identified. As a consequence, over time, successively more critical problems ultimately lead to an egregious outcome. I argue, this proverb may best reflect the contemporary management status of wild horses and burros in the United States.

In 1961, Velma Bronn Johnson (“Wild Horse Annie”) had convinced Nevada Congressman Walter Baring to introduce legislation entitled, “Hunting Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands Act” (Public Law 86-234), prohibiting the use of motorized vehicles to capture wild horses on all public lands. Although the “Wild Horse Annie Act” was passed unanimously by the U.S. Congress to stop “mustanging,” it did not change how wild horses were managed.

In 1971, Congress extended management and protection to all free-ranging wild horses and burros on public lands with passage of the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (Act) of 1971. The Act declared that “wild free-roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death; and to accomplish this they are to be considered in the area where presently found, as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands.” The Act

further regulated the management, protection, and study of “unbranded and unclaimed horses and burros on public lands in the United States,” and directed the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture (the Secretaries) to “maintain thriving natural ecological balance on the public lands.”

Thriving natural ecological balance was set at an Appropriate Management Level (AML) of 26,715 animals. Subsequent amendments to the original legislation, changes in federal policies, appropriation riders, and litigation coupled with annual growth rates of 15–20% contributed to an on-range feral horse population that exceeds the AML by 3-fold and now threatens the very thriving natural ecological balance the Act was designed to protect.

In this issue of *Human–Wildlife Interactions*, contributing authors explore in depth the policy and management of wild horses and burros in the United States and feral and free-roaming horses in Argentina and Canada. Their writings summarize and synthesize the history and contemporary management status of wild horses and burros from ecological, sociological, biological, economic, legal, legislative, and political perspectives.

By and large, all agree that if the current management policies continue, the impacts to fragile western rangelands, wild horses and burros, wildlife and their habitats, and humans will intensify, resulting in irreversible consequences. History will not be kind to us if we continue to pass the management of wild horses and burros on to those not yet born. This history will be written on a landscape that can no longer support a diversity of life because we failed to act.

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