

FREE ROAMING EQUIDS AND ECOSYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY

Wild Horse and Burro Origin and History in the United States

Horses disappear from North America

The horse species of North America went extinct at the end of the Pleistocene epoch, about 12,000 years ago. Evidence suggests that a global cooling event led to the destruction of many large mammal species including woolly mammoths, American camels, dire wolves, sabre tooth cats and woolly rhinos. This event would have been the demise of the horse species without the mitigating factor of the Bering land bridge that once connected Alaska and Siberia, allowing horses to migrate to Europe and Asia. However, the same bridge that allowed horses to survive also may have hastened the extinction in North America as humans crossed from Siberia to North America, specifically the Clovis people, who began hunting horses — adding additional pressure to an already stressed horse population (1).

In 2008 a significant cache of stone implements from the Clovis people was discovered in Boulder City, Colorado. “Biochemical analysis showed that some of the 13,000 year old implements were used to butcher ice-age camels and horses” (1). While the debate continues as to when, how and why horses disappeared from North America, it is conclusive no horses were present when early explorers and settlers arrived. It is also important to note that all predators that once kept a natural balance of horses on these rangelands had also disappeared.

Horses become a commodity in America

The horse continued to evolve in Eurasia where it was domesticated about 5,000 years ago. Horses and burros were re-introduced to North America by European colonists. Some of the horses and burros brought back to North America by Spanish explorers escaped or were intentionally released to the wild. These early populations, derived from Spanish bloodlines, were augmented and largely superseded with intentional and unintentional releases of domesticated horses by the military and others through the mid - 20th century. During the early exploration period, horses were also brought from Europe as a means of transportation across the vast landscape of North America.

Later, as commerce and transportation of goods expanded, breeding of horses and burros became essential for the success of businesses and communities to thrive. Thus, the equine became a highly valued commodity. The demand for “horse power” created a very strong commodity market for horses and burros and they were often the most profitable domestic animal. While the price of range cattle in the 1870s averaged \$20 per head, a work horse would command \$150 and a saddle horse \$200 or more. This demand for horse power created a population boom, from zero horses in the 1600s to over 21,000,000 by 1920 in America alone. (2)

In western states, the “free-range” system prompted large range herds. Ranchers would release domestic horses to the open range, then collect animals to train and sell as demand and opportunity dictated. Selected breeds were released onto the range to create animals that would meet specific requirements, like the Cavalry Remount program, freight animals or Pony Express. Thus, these managed herds grew by the millions to meet the demands of a growing nation. What are now referred to as “wild horses” are actually the remnants of these domestic animals bred and managed to meet specific commodity markets. (3)

No one really knows how many horses and burros were on the range in 1971. The Bureau of Land Management didn't conduct inventories until the early 1980s, and early inventory methods were sketchy. The most recent population figure, released by the BLM in March of 2019 was 88,090 animals. Wild horse populations normally increase around 15- 20 percent per year, a rate that doubles the population every four years. Projecting forward, if not managed, over 1 million free-roaming equids could inhabit western rangelands by 2034 (4).

References:

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