

Are wild horses native to North America?



The Mongolian Wild Horse, from commons.wikimedia.org

Some arguments give me a headache. One is whether wild horses should actually be called feral horses. The Wild Horse and Burro Program is broken and we need to be creative in finding ways to fix it. Of course they are feral, but the accepted term is wild horses and arguing over what to call them does nothing to help solve the problems we face in the western United States.

Another argument is whether wild horses are actually native to North America. Some groups say wild horses never went extinct here after the last Ice Age. Since they have always been here, they are a native species of wildlife and therefore, the U.S. Government might somehow be forced to treat them like any other native wildlife. Others, including myself, know that horses died out in North America about 8,000 years ago and were re-introduced by Spanish explorers. Some, not including myself, take this argument farther by stating wild horses are not native, therefore they are an invasive species, basically vermin, and should be removed.

Madeline Pickens' web site, titled Saving America's Mustangs, sports a headline stating the Reno Gazette Journal has concluded that wild horses are a native species. The newspaper article in question, "Fact Checker: Mustangs - return of the native or invasive Species?" does state that wild horses should be considered native but only based on the fact that their species developed here. It agrees they definitely went extinct in North America and were re-introduced.

A search of the Internet found several wild horse sites citing a Natural History magazine article as proof of their being native. "The Surprising History of America's Wild Horses" does state that wild horses went extinct here, but the authors still think they should be considered a native species. The Yukon Horse is a type of Ice Age horse, whose frozen remains have been found in permafrost. These remains yielded DNA which proved to be identical to the DNA of the modern horse. Both types of horses lived on this continent and both should be considered native to North America.

The article takes this farther by mentioning the Mongolian Wild Horse. It disappeared from the Mongolian landscape around 1900, but the animal was kept alive in zoos and reserves. In the 1990s, individuals were released back into the wild. Is this horse now a re-introduced native or a feral, invasive

species? If one agrees they are a re-introduced native, then the authors ask what difference is there between Mongolian wild Horses and North America's wild horses other than the longer period of time our wild horses were gone from their landscape?

All of this makes my head hurt. Re-introduced native or feral, invasive species, the Wild Horse and Burro Program remains broken. We need to spend our time finding ways to save the program, protect Western public lands and the herds of wild horses these lands support.

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