



Return to freedom



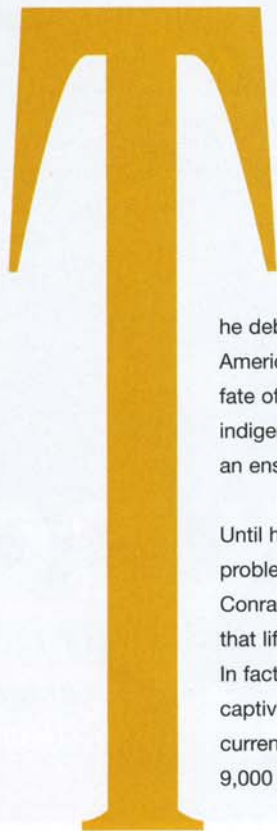
SAVING AN ICON

It must be confessed that horses at present work too exclusively for men, rarely men for horses; and the brute degenerates in man's society.

- Henry David Thoreau -



“Taking these horses off public lands is the same as ripping someone away from their family and home.”



The debate over whether American wild horses are considered native wildlife, indigenous to North America, or “feral,” like weeds, is the absurd crux of a debate that could ultimately determine the fate of the species. As the North American wilderness diminishes, so do the equine descendants of indigenous tribal mounts, military horses released in the 19th century, and plough horses replaced by an ensuing industrial age.

Until horse advocate Neda DeMayo entered the landscape, the U.S. government’s answer to the problem was to round them up, corral and slaughter them. This policy came courtesy of Senator Conrad Burns, who, in 2004, entered a last-minute amendment into a 4,000-page appropriations bill that lifted the 1971 federal ban on the sale and slaughter of wild horses and burros.

In fact, as a result of an ongoing and aggressive removal policy, more wild horses are now living in captivity than in the wild. The Bureau of Land Management attempts to justify this condition with the current assessment that of the 37,000 horses and burros that still roam on public rangelands, there are 9,000 too many.



The concern (lobby, if you prefer), is that the wild herds are depleting lands where private cattle herds graze, so the bureau is now authorized to round up and sell thousands of horses. The claim that horses and cows are actually competing for grass in the vast wilderness is perplexing, and certainly worthy of a rebuttal in the debate that apparently didn't occur.

So in 1997 DeMayo and her family took the bull by the horns and founded the **Return to Freedom** (RTF) sanctuary in the Jalama Valley of Lompoc, California, with the goal of preserving genetic diversity and ensuring the survival of America's free-ranging wild horses. "Taking these horses off public lands is the same as ripping someone away from their family and home," says DeMayo. "They live in social groups just like humans. Whatever their historical, genetic or biological significance, today's wild horses represent evolution in their respective habitat."

Other reputable experts would agree. According to Dr. Jay Kirkpatrick, Director of the Science and Conservation Center in Billings, Montana, "Return to Freedom's pioneering model represents a breakthrough in the humane and effective management of wild horses, allowing them to express the social organization and behaviors common to the species, without fear of uncontrolled reproduction." Committed to conserving the diverse bloodlines that define the American wild horse, RTF maintains a rare breed preservation program on 300 acres of stunningly beautiful land. Some of the herd, over 200 animals, represent breeds with DNA similar to primitive Iberian horses, or *Sorrias* – the direct and undiluted descendants of the Spanish Mission.

Founded on the principles of conservation and education, and the viewpoint that education is the most potent catalyst for positive change, this model program



is exploring alternative and minimally intrusive management philosophies; offering a wide spectrum of experiential education programs where young and old alike can learn through the sensitive observation of the natural world. And this is all because of Neda DeMayo.

"I cannot remember a time when I did not love horses. My mother said 'horse' was one of my first words, and to be near them I began riding at the age of five. I can remember seeing wild horses on television being chased by everything from cowboys to hovering helicopters and wanting to help them escape and have a place for them to remain free, together, and safe. As I grew up, my relationship with horses deepened and I began to think about somehow, some way, to start a sanctuary for wild horses. Years later, living on the West Coast, I read about the wild-horse adoptions sponsored by the Bureau of Land Management and how some of the horses, because they could not be domesticated, were being slaughtered. Despite the best of intentions, these programs were failing. I felt compelled to do something about it."

At this moment, DeMayo continues to battle the government. Lifting the ban on the sale of wild horses, she says, "opens the floodgates" for their slaughter. She maintains a great deal of hope, continuing to put her actions and money where her mouth is, albeit worried that without financial help she will not be able to maintain the resources she needs to sustain her mission. Her rescue is beginning to gather momentum, however, in the form of support from groups covering the spectrum from livestock ranchers to activists and scientists. The American public is beginning to embrace her goal to protect and preserve the wild horse. Her next step is to establish *The American Wild Horse Conservancy*.

RTF Founder Neda De Mayo

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Whether or not anything is sacred these days is moot – everything becoming a matter of perceived value. But when we resort to placing subjective and arbitrary worth on noble, gentle creatures, it's time to pull in the reins, perhaps restate our priorities. After all, this land is our land.

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WILD HORSE WINERY

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