

Return to Freedom

An American Wild Horse Sanctuary



By Corinne Joy Brown

For anyone who has listened to national news in recent months, the plight of wild horses in the West has risen to a new level of public awareness. Aerial roundups have resulted in unnecessary deaths of younger and weakened animals and the holding pens retaining these hapless beasts are at capacity. Environmentalist and preservationist protest the roundups as much as BLM officials and cattlemen stand by them, insisting that the horses are a nuisance and have encroached on lease pastures needed for cattle.

In the much debated struggle to save America's wild horses and burros, it appears that the equines are losing, but it won't be without a fight. The remaining herds in the American West, amounting to approximately 28,000 free ranging animals in 10 states, a dramatic reduction over the last twenty years, are in danger of disappearing as a natural resource wherever they still roam. Diminishing grazing grounds and urbanization, along with range politics, have forced the longstanding, free roaming herds off rangelands and decreased chances for continued natural evolution. Only conscious efforts to save these animals and their habitats will prevent the inevitable loss and only informed leadership can properly provide for their survival. Wild horses have needed a voice

and an advocate and few in that capacity are as educated, passionate and effective as Neda DeMayo, founder of Return to Freedom - American Wild Horse Sanctuary, a protectorate for wild herds everywhere.

An unlikely warrior, Neda DeMayo is determined and relentless in reaching the widest audience possible to share the news of her foundation and its purpose. Founded in 1997 in order to educate the public about the options for wild horses, Return to Freedom is a non-profit wild horse and burro sanctuary on 300 acres near Lompoc, (Santa Barbara County,) California, dedicated to preservation, conservation and education.

Seven days a week, some 250 horses comprised of a number of rare breeds, live at the sanctuary safe from natural and human predators. Here, an educational center allows for viewing the horses on the rolling hills. The majority of the herds are left in a natural state and only receive vet services and supplemental feed, if absolutely necessary. These horses are never adopted out. Instead, April through September, the facility is open for tours and work study programs enabling students, statesmen, biologists, and tourists to see wild horses, in naturally selected herds and behaving in their natural herd order. DeMayo points out that many were taken in as entire families so as to maintain their hierarchy.



Left: Hart Mountain Herd at the water hole, Return to Freedom Sanctuary

Photo credit: Elissa Kline

Below: 2009 Choctaw foals within the safety of their sanctuary.

Photo credit: Sue Ratcliff



“Return To Freedom was created as a model,” she explained, “so we could see if the concept would work--that is to preserve and protect with the least intrusive management necessary, while informing the public through sensitive observation. We’re pleased to say that it does.”

Unique in the family of horse sanctuaries, Return to Freedom has slowly garnered enthusiastic support from many organizations across the continent comprised of horse lovers and naturalists.

“In order to preserve viable healthy herds, available data indicates that outbred herds of no less than 80 animals will not lead to any inbreeding problems,” DeMayo continued. “Some strains of our wild horses have almost disappeared, such as the Colonial Spanish horses that were the foundation of what we later called the Spanish Mustang in America. These horses include the Choctaw ponies, the Sulphur Springs, Wilbur-Cruce and others who, as they got loose, interbred with larger European breeds. Many of the larger breeds we know today were created and enhanced with infusions

of these hardy horses. We would like to provide a place for these horses to free range and return to a 'natural selection' where they can choose their own bands. In order to protect the herds from any catastrophic loss that would reduce the population below 80, we hope to maintain herds with at least a minimum of 130-150 of each geographic type to preserve healthy herd groups. To those who value the wild horse as a unique species, it is essential that they continue their natural evolution uninterrupted."

Sadly, not everyone in the West agrees and the debate over their future rages hotly even now, in spite of the historic Wild free Roaming Horse and Burro Act, passed back in 1971. Although heavily amended since then, the Act offered protection, management and control of horses and burros, all deemed living symbols of the pioneer West.

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Refuting many who believe that wild horses are neither wild nor indigenous to North America and are a nuisance to rangelands and other livestock, naysayers can refer to recent molecular biology research compiled by Dr. Jay F Kirkpatrick, Phd., Director of the Science and Conservation Center in Billings, Montana. He attests that wild horses are, in fact, a re-introduced native wildlife species.

Kirkpatrick states, "The genus Equus, which includes modern horses, zebras, and asses, is the only surviving genus in a once diverse family of horses that included 27 genres. Equus was native to North America 1.4 to 1.6 million years ago and migrated to Asia where it survived and flourished. It was reintroduced to the North American continent in 1519 by Hernando Cortez then continued to be imported northward by the Spaniards from Mexico. Recent genetic research has proven that the modern horse is the true genetic equivalent to E Lambei, the last horse to occupy North America prior to extinction."

That being said, it stands to reason that the horse is as much of a part of our landscape as the grizzly or the moose, or any other free roaming species that has survived the millennia. That they have been caught and domesticated by men for centuries has rendered them, in the minds of many, into just one more stock animal, created to serve mankind. But, as pointed out by Kirkpatrick, horses revert to wildness and adapt to feral life readily, illustrating the shallowness of their domestication.

DeMayo believes that only through education can the American public and those yet to come, enjoy the value, beauty and inspiration of wild horses and burros, not only as a unique wildlife species but as a cultural and historic resource. Even then, it will only work if the animals are protected in viable, healthy genetic groups. This kind of effort requires supervision, tracking, personnel, and donor support -- a full time job on its own. RTF can boast a donor list of over 23,000 contributors annually with a \$700,000.00 dollar budget, (\$85,000 per month), an amount that, sadly, never goes far enough. In spite of their success, De Mayo believes that it will take the duplication of her sanctuary's efforts to be successful in the long run.

"The privatization of America's wild horses makes no more sense than privatizing our National Parks System to save our wilderness areas," she said. "The conflicts that surround the wild horse and public land use are cultural, economic, and therefore political."

To maintain herd population at the California facility, Dr. Kirkpatrick oversees a reversible, non-hormonal birth control program, allowing the herd's social behavior and the natural herd dynamics to continue, while reproduction is controlled. Meanwhile, reversals in wild horse protection have caused needless slaughter of wild horses. In 2005 the Burns Amendment has put a noose around any wild horse over ten years of age that has been rejected three times at auction, the usual method of relocating animals that are rounded up in order to control herd sizes. These animals are designated for slaughter. In the wake of a seemingly inexhaustible resource, foreign owned slaughterhouses (using horsemeat for human consumption,) have appeared to make a profit. This insult to a national icon comes at a time when America faces threats to many of her natural resources for commercial purposes, a sad comment on our relationship with wildlife and horses in particular.



Chief and his mares, Sulphur Springs herd Photo Credit: Kimerlee Curyl Photography



Chief and his mare, Sulphur Springs herd. Photo Credit: Kimerlee Curyl Photography

As Congress currently reassesses the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, a hotly debated prohibition against these commercial horse mongers, DeMayo and others are indignant over a profound and ignoble disregard for our wild equine. "If the prohibition succeeds," she added, "then we can hope for a moratorium that will allow the BLM to do a proper headcount

On a more positive note, de Mayo adds that "Back in 2009, we were able to get Robert Redford to help us with personalized letters to members of Congress on behalf of wild horses (protesting the Sale Authority amendment) as well as to support the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act."

Return to Freedom would like to see the introduction of incentives for the public land ranchers who hold the grazing permits where the horses range, in order to allow the horses to remain in their proper wilderness habitats a dream on its way to coming true. "In some areas, eco-tourism could then make viewing them more than profitable. The BLM currently spends between 30-60 million on the wild horse and burro management program. Just imagine it. Ironically," she adds, "it's cheaper to support the horses on the range than it is to round them up and remove them, but few understand that."

Meanwhile, at the Sanctuary, De Mayo has created a learning opportunity equal to none. School children can visit nature's classroom and partake of living history tours, clinics, special youth programs and retreats. Photographers are invited in for special Photo Safaris, allowing many to view and photograph the wild horse. An onsite celebrity at the Sanctuary is Spirit, the beautiful dun stallion who was the inspiration and model for the 2002 DreamWorks film, Spirit - Stallion of the Cimarron.

This horse, actually ranch bred, is a prime example of the Kiger breed, found on the high desert of eastern Oregon in 1977 and agreed by government officials to be a band of very rare horses. To preserve these animals, they were relocated to an area near Kiger George, Oregon.

Adult and youth volunteer work programs are also available. Here, both ranchers and the public can learn about range management and guardianship. In fact, there's simply no one who can't learn something valuable about horses and preserving America's greatest inheritance -- our country's wild and natural resources.

Return To Freedom currently maintains six distinct geographic phenotypes, horse herds representing differentiated specialized groups with the same unique characteristics. The facility is now poised for their next step, the expansion of the Return To Freedom Sanctuary into a large scale wild horse conservancy, a historical land trust that incorporates the wild horse as part of the wildlife ecosystem. DeMayo is close to securing a larger ranch ideally suited to sustain herd groups, a sought after dream for displaced free roaming herds.

"More importantly," she continued, excitement in her voice, "in 2010 we submitted a proposal to the government that puts an agenda in front of the revolving range conflicts. The proposal suggests that funds used for costly and traumatic roundups and long term holding of the wild horses, are redirected for 'on the range' management alternatives and range improvements (spring restoration, fence removal or repair, wildlife corridors etc). It would call on those who have ranches with livestock grazing permits on wild horse Herd Management Areas to be eligible for



Neda DeMayo's heroic effort can be measured by how successful we are at saving our wild, voiceless equine companions and their brethren. Please join her.

Photo Credit: Tony Stromberg

incentives by allowing some of their Animal Units used by cattle to be used by horses instead. The proposal includes a public private partnership with range studies, monitoring data, range improvements, stewardship and on the range wild horse management (gathering smaller bands at a time to administer immuno-contraception and then re-release). In the long run, it would be less expensive for the BLM (and the taxpayer) to move in this new direction than continue with what they're doing now. This is a solvable issue but we all need to work together and appreciate the value of the free ranging wild horse in the world today."

In a parallel effort, DeMayo and Return to Freedom have purchased and adopted 107 wild Nevada mustangs who were captured in the BLM's controversial Calico Mountains Complex and Silver King roundups last year. Thanks to RTF, the 82 mares, three yearlings, a foal, 21 stallions and a gelding are beginning a new life. All the horses are residing in temporary quarters in Fallon, Nevada. Eventually mares and stallions captured from the same Herd Management Areas will be paired, as RTF rebuilds family bands for these wild horses and creates a spacious preserve in the Northwest where they can live as naturally as possible. In several cases, RTF has identified and rescued members of the same family bands and will reunite them when the preserve is created.

According to DeMayo, RTF is undertaking this first-of-its-kind rescue in order to offer these proud survivors, who have endured so much trauma and loss, an alternative to life in BLM holding facilities.

"These noble horses, once free on the range and now held captive, symbolize the tragedy of the federal wild horse program," DeMayo says. "The rescue is a gesture of restitution for what has been taken from these horses and an affirmation of our commitment to fundamental change in the BLM wild horse program. These horses are ancestors of Cavalry and draft horses who helped create the Great Basin ranching history.

The horse originated in North America and became one of the greatest gifts to cultures all over the world. America's free ranging wild horses of today are fighting for their rightful place on our public lands. Whether they are remnants from the early Spanish horses or Cavalry and ranching history, they have adapted to these harsh remote environments and represent the current adaptation of the North American wild horse.

With the ongoing pressure of raising funds to sustain the facility while also developing a larger preserve, DeMayo and her small dedicated staff face enormous hurdles. A documentary in the works will hopefully help get the word out to more contributors. Facing the future undaunted, she continues to prove that we can make a difference, one person at a time. Neda DeMayo's heroic effort can be measured by how successful we are at saving our wild, voiceless equine companions and their brethren. Please join her. www.returntofreedom.com 805-737-9246



Neda DeMayo with famous stallion "Spirit of the Cimarron"
Photo Credit: Florian Wagner