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**Honest Horses — Wild Horses in the Great Basin.** Paula Morin. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2006, 376 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

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Paula Morin, author of *Honest Horses — Wild Horses in the Great Basin*, is very knowledgeable and passionate about the Great Basin and its inhabitants. She has obtained very insightful, informative, and candid narratives from 62 people who currently have or have had extensive involvement with the horses, the habitat, the ranches, the wildlife, the history of the region, and the Bureau of Land Management, whose task it is to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship on public lands. These narratives graphically point out that the best intentions are often plagued by unforeseen and unintended consequences.

The saga and plight of the wild (feral) horse in the western United States and, more specifically, the area known as the Great Basin is a reflection of America's past heritage and traditional western values which themselves have to adapt to rapidly advancing urbanization with its own set of social values. This scientific, political, and ideological struggle presents numerous dilemmas for which there are no easy solutions. Unfortunately, the horses themselves often become the focal point of this on-going debate, when in fact they are just one of many factors that must be considered when use of public lands is discussed.

Several core beliefs are shared by the contributors. They all believe the horses are meant to be an integral part of the ecosystem of the Great Basin and do recognize them as a cultural symbol of our pioneering past. As one of the contributors points out, the horse is the only member of the extinct ice age fauna to be reestablished on this continent. The habitat, however, is of first and foremost importance and must be cared for at all costs. The habitat for all inhabitants is shrinking in terms of available land. The contributors also all have a love and respect for the horses. The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burro Act and the Wild Horse and Burro Program managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for a variety of reasons have not been able to resolve many of the issues of how to manage the horses on and off the range. The program has been chronically underfunded since its inception. It is now spending a considerable per cent of its annual budget on maintaining surplus horses in long-term holding facilities rather than on improving the habitat for its many

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inhabitants and it has been hampered by on-going legal and political challenges from various wild horse advocacy groups.

In 1971, when the BLM was given the responsibility of managing the wild horses by Congress, the horses and burros had access to nearly 54 million acres of federal land in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. Since then, changes in land ownership, congressional actions, and public land use decisions have diminished habitat accessible to horses by almost half. The BLM claims that wild horse and burro herds can double in population every four years, which requires that a certain number of horses must be gathered and removed from the range to prevent overpopulation and the attendant consequences of that occurring.

Many of the more senior contributors to this book described times well before the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burro Act when the ranchers of the region were basically managing the wild horses as they did their own horses and livestock and, in fact, they would turn their own horses out on the range with the wild horses, gather them when needed, capture and train some of the wild horses for their own use, allow their stallions to breed with the wild mares, and remove excess horses and sell them. This symbiotic relationship apparently existed for a number of years, and from the descriptions provided in sections of this book, the horses were not harassed or abused whatsoever. Unfortunately, as the number of wild horses gradually increased to more unmanageable levels, more aggressive and sometimes cruel and inhumane tactics were used to control the population of horses. This unjust treatment of the horses is what prompted the drafting and passage of the federal legislation that protected the wild horses from abuse.

Even though the contributors to this book agree on several issues relating to the presence of wild horses on public land as described above, they also disagree vehemently on a number of issues and these disagreements often become quite contentious, leading to the filing of lawsuits and the imposition of injunctions against the BLM. Most of these actions center on the process and justification for the removal of horses from the range to achieve appropriate management levels. Certain wild horse advocates believe that the horses are not a threat to the habitat and that if left alone, nature will take its course and populations will be controlled by natural attrition. However, most people familiar with what actually happens on the range disagree and are able to provide evidence that habitat damage does occur when horses overpopulate a herd management area and if left to nature, the consequences of horses dying "naturally" from either starvation or thirst is neither defensible nor humane.

Based on the opinion of the range specialists contributing to this book and the objective, scientific data they have gathered over the years, there is little doubt that there are more horses roaming free on public lands in many of the herd management areas than the habitat is able to endure, and because horses are capable of reproducing at the rate of about 20–25% per year, overpopulation is inevitable without employing some method of depopulation or birth control periodically to control the number of horses. Controlling the population can basically occur in three ways. The first and least tolerable way is to allow nature to take its course, but as mentioned previously, this is not humane nor how most Americans would want these horses to be treated. Besides, these horses are very resourceful and would continue to reproduce to some extent even under inclement environmental conditions. The second method is to periodically remove excess horses randomly from the population to avoid imposing any man-made genetic bias and disturbing the natural genetic diver-

sity and selection dynamics. This is the program that the BLM has utilized over the years. In the past 38 years the BLM has successfully removed nearly 250,000 horses from public lands and found suitable owners to adopt these horses. The horses that were deemed unadoptable have been sent to long-term holding facilities on private land to be maintained for the remainder of their lives paid for by the federal government. The third method would be to implement a birth control program using a reversible immunocontraceptive vaccine that is currently available and which would prevent mares from becoming pregnant for 1–2 years at a time. Concerns have been raised that sterilizing preferential mares even temporarily will adversely affect genetic diversity by depleting the gene pool; however, the argument could be made that the current removal method could also have the same adverse effect. Utilizing the immunocontraception method would potentially reduce the number of horses being sent to long-term holding facilities and the attendant costs and problems associated with maintaining horses for the remainder of their lives.

That leads to perhaps the most contentious issue of all, which is what should be done with the excess number of horses once they are removed from the range. Interestingly, Velma Johnson (“Wild Horse Annie”), the driving force behind the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, and now deceased, must have known that if she was able to protect the horses on the range there would eventually be an excess or surplus of wild horses, so in the legislation she introduced to Congress she made provisions for the euthanasia of such horses removed from the range. One would have to surmise that she might not like the idea that over 30,000 of her beloved horses are now being stockpiled in long-term holding facilities off the range because they are unadoptable and considered surplus.

Whatever the fate of these horses shall be on and off the range, it should not be decided based purely on emotion and political action, but rather on sound scientific evidence of what is best for the habitat and for all of the creatures that inhabit the land, including the horses. This collection of narratives from individuals intimately involved with these horses and the Great Basin they inhabit, graphically points out the complexity involved with preserving this important symbol of the American west.

Despite the fact that this book contains mostly anecdotal accounts based on the opinions of the contributors about the state of affairs regarding wild horses in the Great Basin, I found the information to be quite accurate and for the most part based on facts that I became aware of when serving on the Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board to the Secretary of Agriculture. The book provides the reader with a very clear and broad-based picture of the issues involved with the wild horses from both a historical and contemporary standpoint. It graphically points out the complexity of maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance in this vast, rugged, but also fragile part of the United States. It also makes clear that the task of addressing the concerns of all of the stakeholders is formidable and one that will never be able to appease them all. The book will provide the reader with a sense of empathy for these horses and the people so devoted to preserving their heritage.