

Salt River horses: What should happen to them?

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What If: Two experts debate the fate of the horses, which the Forest Service had planned to remove from public lands.



(Photo: Isaac Hale/The Republic)

REMOVE THEM AND SPARE OUR LANDS

The horses must be removed to protect the riparian ecosystem.

The recruitment of broad-leaf deciduous riparian trees such as Fremont cottonwood and Gooding's willow have suffered considerably from the activities of these trespassing horses. These trees and other native plants provide habitats for native animals, including fish that depend on the shade they provide and stable stream banks to prevent erosion.

As the current cottonwood and trees succumb to age, fire and disease, they will not be replaced as needed by new cottonwood and willow trees. Many stream sides will have no growth while others will be crowded with the invasive salt cedar tree.



Thom Hulén is a lifelong Arizona resident who has spent his career advocating for natural and cultural resources. (Photo: handout)

Our willful complicity or complacency in allowing these feral horses to remain in the area where they will continue to negatively affect the riparian ecology is unforgivable if we insist on protecting these horses.

Many of the horse supporters claim they have evidence that these horses descended from horses brought by early Spanish explorers, missionaries and settlers. Please show the world your evidence. I do not believe this evidence exists.

The Forest Service failed the American people and the public land Americans hold so dear. They should have removed the horses a long time ago to protect the asset they are responsible for, the Tonto National Forest.

So when you cannot find a southwestern willow flycatcher or a yellow billed cuckoo or even the common riparian birds in the cottonwood and willow trees along the Salt and Verde Rivers, thank the Forest Service, and the people who value the feral horses more than native wildlife and habitat.

I sure will.

Thom Hulén, Tempe, advocate for natural and cultural resources:

LEAVE THESE WESTERN ICONS ALONE

The Salt River wild horses are living pieces of history. They have aesthetic value, fill an important ecological niche (reducing fire danger, spreading native seeds, keeping the river flowing by reducing eel grass) and promote ecotourism resources, drawing local visitors and tourists from all over the world.

The Forest Service will commit a colossal, historic and irreversible mistake if it destroys these beloved horses. We hope it will choose a different path, and we stand ready to work with the Forest Service on win-win solutions to protect the horses and the public, and to preserve these amazing horses as an irreplaceable historic, cultural and natural resource.

Solutions proposed to the Forest Service include:

-- Working together on a habitat stewardship program that includes removal of environmental and safety hazards like the miles of old downed barbed wire fencing, as well as cleanup of litter in the Tonto National Forest.

-- Humane dartible birth control PZP.

It is available, effective and humane, and does not impact wild horse behavior, as it works outside of the reproductive hormonal system. The board members of the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group are certified to deliver the vaccine.



We have documented the herd's true growth rate (birth rate minus death rate) at 6 percent per year, a far cry from government claims of 25 percent annual growth rate for wild horse populations.

-- We have already worked with the Department of Transportation and carefully placed "watch for horses" signs at all horse crossings on Bush Highway. There is still room for improvement by adding motion-sensored flashing lights that will go off when the horses near the crossing.

Simone Netherlands, founder of the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group.

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Simone Netherlands, founder of the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group. (Photo: handout)

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