



Feral Horse Management at Assateague Island National Seashore

INTRODUCTION

Assateague Island National Seashore (ASIS) was established in 1965 as a unit of the National Park System to conserve the natural resources and recreational values of Assateague Island and adjacent coastal waters. The authorized boundary includes approximately 48,700 acres of land and water in Maryland and Virginia. Of this, 8,400 acres in Virginia are managed as Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, and 600 acres are managed as Assateague State Park in Maryland. The mission of the National Seashore is to preserve and protect the unique coastal resources of Assateague Island and the natural ecosystem conditions and processes upon which they depend, while providing high quality resource-based recreational and educational opportunities.

The feral horses of ASIS are, perhaps, the park's most well known natural resource. Thousands of visitors are attracted to Assateague each year for the opportunity to view free-roaming horses in a natural barrier island setting. When the National Seashore acquired ownership of the horses in 1968, the herd numbered approximately 28. By 2000, the population had grown to more than 170. With this growth has come an increase in the negative effects of feral horses on the park's other natural resources. Although the horses are an important part of the Assateague experience, there is a pressing need to manage the population in ways that will provide for the long-term health of the herd as well as minimize adverse impacts to other park resources.



ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF FERAL HORSE MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

To fulfill its mission, ASIS proposes to develop and assess the environmental consequences of several alternatives for long-term management of the Assateague feral horses. Potential outcomes of this process include actions to reduce the size of the population, manage reproductive rates, reduce negative human-horse interactions, and enhance the health and viability of the herd and its island habitats.

WHICH ASSATEAGUE HORSES?



There are two herds of horses living on Assateague Island separated by a fence at the Maryland/Virginia state line. The “Chincoteague ponies” inhabit the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island, and are owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department, which manages the population size by holding an annual summer roundup to auction off most of the foals. The Maryland herd is owned and managed by the National Park Service (NPS), and inhabits both ASIS and Assateague State Park. This is not the end of the pony penning! It is the NPS-managed herd living in Maryland that is the focus of this management assessment.

HISTORY AND MANAGEMENT OF THE FERAL HORSES

Historical documents refer to the presence of horses on Assateague Island since the late 1600's. Early residents of the region used the island to graze horses and other livestock, with periodic roundups or “pennings” held to determine ownership, and to count and sell stock. Although the familiar legends of ponies escaping from a wrecked Spanish ship persist, they appear to have little basis in fact.

In the 1920's, pony penning on Assateague Island was formalized as a means of supporting the volunteer fire company on adjacent Chincoteague Island. With the establishment of Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR) on the Virginia portion of Assateague in 1943, ownership of the feral horses officially passed to the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department. Since then, the Fire Department has continued to graze the herd on the southern portion of Assateague through a special use permit granted by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

When the National Seashore was established in 1965, most of the horses had been removed from the Maryland portion of Assateague and confined to CNWR by a fence on the northern reaches of the refuge. The exception was a small, free-ranging herd belonging to a Maryland landowner who had purchased 9 “Chincoteague ponies” for private enjoyment in 1961. In 1968, the NPS acquired legal ownership of those horses and their offspring. At that point, the horse population numbered 28.

Despite their status as an exotic (non-native) species, the park's 1982 General Management Plan recognized the importance of the horses and directed that the horses be managed as a “desirable feral species” within the overall purposes of the National Seashore. As the population expanded during the 1970s and 1980s, park managers began to observe increasing evidence of resource damage caused by the horses. Recognizing the need for some form of population control, the park initiated research in 1985 to develop and test contraceptives. The result of that effort, a contraceptive vaccine, has been used to manage the population since 1994.

Impacts on Natural Resources and Processes

- Disruption of dune formation and stability
- Fewer rare and threatened plants
- Changes to plant community composition
- Reduced biodiversity
- Soil compaction
- Loss of natural habitats
- Interruption of native wildlife ecology



While the use of contraceptives has successfully lowered reproductive rates and reduced the size of the feral horse population, continued reliance upon contraception as the sole management strategy may not be sufficient to reverse the declining ecological health of the island or protect the long-term health of the horse population.

To begin to address these and other concerns, ASIS enlisted the expertise of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) of the IUCN-World Conservation Union in 2006 to conduct a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) workshop to evaluate management strategies for the feral horse population in Maryland. This effort, involving key stakeholders and partners, resulted in important information as well as several potential management strategies to consider in future feral horse management.



THE CHALLENGE

The National Park Service is faced with competing objectives and interests in managing the feral horses. On the one hand, ASIS is committed to protecting the health and viability of the herd and providing visitors with opportunities to view free-roaming horses. On the other hand, ASIS must manage the horse population in ways that protect and maintain the natural barrier island ecosystem, which is home to several threatened and endangered species as well as many sensitive and globally rare plant communities. To address these and other challenges, the National Park Service has begun a planning process to develop new strategies for management of the feral horse population on Assateague Island National Seashore.

Horse Management Objectives

- Reduce the negative impacts of horses on key species, communities and natural processes to levels compatible with legal mandates and the continued evolution of Assateague Island toward a natural condition.
- Maintain a free-roaming herd of feral horses that exhibit natural characteristics and are subject to natural processes.
- Maintain a healthy population of horses capable of successful reproduction.
- Educate the general public on the Assateague horses, including their history, behavior, ecological impacts and scientifically-based management.
- Recognize and utilize the population as a valuable research resource; however, management strategies shall not be modified in the interests of research.
- Provide a reasonable opportunity for visitors to view horses safely.

Protecting Horse Population Health...

- Maintain genetic diversity
- Ensure food and space availability
- Protect reproduction capacity



...and Visitor Experience

- Protect natural barrier island conditions
- Provide opportunities to view horses
- Maintain horses as free-roaming herd



THE PLANNING PROCESS

This informational brochure has been prepared as part of the planning process being conducted by the National Park Service pursuant to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing NEPA (40 CFR Part 1500 et seq.). The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 established as a goal for federal decision-making, achieving a balance between use and preservation of natural and cultural resources. NEPA requires all federal agencies to 1) identify and evaluate potential impacts of their actions on the human environment, which includes natural and cultural resources as well as socioeconomic considerations; 2) use the information gained through the evaluation in deciding what action to take and disclose any environmental consequences that may result from that action; and 3) diligently attempt to involve the interested and affected public before any decision affecting the environment is made.



The following describes the major steps in the planning process:



- Step 1. Define purpose and need for action
- Step 2. Conduct scoping and define alternatives**
- Step 3. Identify environmental impacts and select preferred alternative
- Step 4. Prepare Environmental Assessment - assessment of effect
- Step 5. Public review of Environmental Assessment
- Step 6. Analysis of public & agency comments
- Step 7. Prepare final decision document
- Step 8. Release final decision document to the public

A key step in the planning process is called scoping, during which time important issues and concerns are identified in order to develop alternatives and make informed decisions. The principal goal of scoping is to increase understanding of an issue and thus reduce conflicts about the proposed action among stakeholders who might be affected by the proposed action.

Open House

Date: Wednesday, December 6th, 2006

Time: 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Location: Assateague Island National Seashore Headquarters
7206 National Seashore Lane
Berlin, MD

You, the public, play an important role in this effort, particularly during the scoping phase. This is your time to provide input and air your concerns about the issues you think should be addressed by the Environmental Assessment. We invite you to participate in this process and express your opinions by attending our Open House meeting and/or sending us your comments in writing. *The scoping process ends on December 15th, 2006; so please provide us with your comments before then.*



Please send your written comments to:

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