

# Wild Horse Roundups and Removals

*Affect, Gender,  
Interspecies Politics*

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**Abstract:** The US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has been aggressively reducing the size of wild horse herds in the American West. The agency's wild horse roundup and removals, we argue, constitute instructive sites of political contestation about what—and whose—knowledge counts. We trace how the gendered affective interspecies relations that arise in these spaces shape claims-making about the presence of wild horses on public lands, and how these competing claims struggle for public recognition and political credibility. Our contribution to the study of the political function of emotion is focused on the interplay between its avowal and disavowal. A reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from 28 roundups and removals reveals that the BLM's disavowal of emotion serves to place both wild horses and wild horse advocates in the same subaltern category of being destructive, disruptive, and out of place—in short, “feral”. Wild horse advocates' engagement with affect is both more complex and more ambivalent. At times, advocates exercise emotional restraint in an effort to defuse attempts by anti-horse interests to disparage wild horse advocacy as mere sentimentality. However, we argue, advocates' ecofeminist practice of politically engaged “witnessing” of roundups and removals doubles down on more-than-human affective attachments precisely to resist the “double-feralization” of wild horses and the humans who care for them. Improved understanding of the dynamics of gender and affect in the struggle about the future of wild horses on US public lands helps clarify pathways toward a more compassionate coexistence with wild horse herds.

**Keywords:** *Wild horses, interspecies politics, politics of emotion, affect, witnessing, entangled empathy, compassionate conservation, wild horse advocacy*

### **Bios:**

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**T**his paper originates in an unsettling roadside encounter. Jennifer Britton was photographing wild horses in the Salt Wells Creek wild horse herd management area near Rock Springs, Wyoming in 2018. She was observing the well-known stallion called “Bubba” and his band. Bubba, a massive black horse with the signature curly mane and tail that many horses in this herd are known for, has been in many ways the face of the Salt Wells Creek herd. He is immediately recognizable in photographs shared in wild-horse-focused social media spaces (Fig. 1). Britton’s observation of the horses was suddenly interrupted, however. As she recorded in her field notes of that day: “A rancher stopped his truck next to me along dirt road 27 and screamed at me for a time about how much he hates the horses. His face turned bright pink. He concluded his tirade by shouting about how he would shoot them all if he could, and then drove off.”<sup>1</sup> This one-sided interaction, a vivid demonstration of anti-wild-horse sentiment in the American West, stayed with her. To be sure, the significance of affect in the politics of US wild horse management had suggested itself to her before.<sup>2</sup> But there is nothing quite like an elderly man’s blind rage interrupting your peaceful day of watching horses graze in a sagebrush-covered valley to remind you that you may have been understating its importance.

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 prohibits the killing of unbranded and unclaimed horses and burros on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and United States Forest Service (USFS) land. The prohibition against killing does not cover all free-roaming equids in the United States, however. Protections and population management levels derived from the Act apply only to herds who inhabit BLM and USFS land; governance of herds present on other federal lands or Indigenous territories is subject to various different rules.<sup>3</sup> On land managed by the BLM and USFS, the focus of our research, the agencies’ preferred means of regulating population size is the periodic removal of “excess” horses and burros to government-operated holding facilities and privately contracted

1 Jennifer Britton, field notes.

2 See Hunold and Britton, “Wild and Free”.

3 See Wallace et al., “An Abundance Estimate”.



**Figure 1:**

The well-known Salt Wells Creek stallion Bubba, recognizable by his curly coat, big right knee, and distinctive head shape, is an offspring of the equally beloved stallion Goliath.

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ranches where tens of thousands of the animals live out the rest of their lives—though each year several thousand are adopted by private citizens. Removals are justified in terms of various threats wild horses pose to semi-arid rangelands, such as damage to vegetation, soils, and riparian areas.<sup>4</sup> These threats are identified by a rangeland ecology and management science enterprise housed at public universities and federal research stations in the western US. Prevalent in rangeland ecology and management literature is frustration that legislation and public opinion prevent lethal culling to control horse populations. A recurring theme in this literature is the unique difficulty of negotiating with wild horse advocates who are passionately immersed in wild horse preservation.<sup>5</sup> For example, Kirk Davies and Chad Boyd note that “science-based ecosystem conservation is confounded by human psychology and the politics and sociology of horse advocacy groups.”<sup>6</sup> This statement is emblematic of the way public lands management research frames emotion and science as being at odds with each other. Specifically, well-intentioned men of science (and they are usually men, for rangeland science and management are male-dominated professions) are hamstrung by the public’s valuing of charismatic but destructive animals getting in the way of efficient removals. Not only do these professions defend killing wild horses in the name of science, they also dismiss resistance to such proposals as irrational. However, lest there be any confusion about whose capacity for reason is being questioned here, the vast majority of wild horse advocates happen to be women.

As it happens, Davies and Boyd are based at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center located near Burns, Oregon, just 25 miles away from the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. In January 2016, the refuge was the site of an occupation by armed public lands ranchers and right-wing militants led by members of the notorious Bundy family, public lands ranchers known for their prior armed standoffs with federal law enforcement

4 See Danvir, “Multiple-Use Management”; Davies and Boyd, “Ecological Effects”.

5 See Beever et al., “Conservation Challenges”; Danvir, “Multiple-Use Management”; Davies and Boyd, “Ecological Effects”; Norris, “Review”.

6 Davies and Boyd, “Ecological Effects”, 563.

officers over disputes about public lands grazing lease violations. The occupation had been inspired by the prosecution of Dwight and Steven Hammond, two public lands ranchers with grazing leases adjacent to the refuge. The Hammonds had been convicted of arson following a string of lease violations, and they had frequently issued death threats and other threats of violence against refuge employees.<sup>7</sup> Lost on the occupiers, one presumes, was the bitter irony of white ranchers questioning the legitimacy of federal ownership of land that, in the late nineteenth century, had been stolen from the Wadatika band of the Northern Paiute in a decades-long campaign of dispossession that concluded when the US Congress dissolved the Malheur Reservation in 1883.<sup>8</sup> In any event, the occupation held the nation's attention for its more than month-long duration. In the end, the refuge facilities were seriously damaged, several of the occupation leaders arrested, and Arizona rancher LaVoy Finicum was killed. Far from an anomaly, the Malheur occupation was of a piece with the legacy of twentieth-century range wars fuelled by “tensions over land and resources, identity and belonging, autonomy and authority”<sup>9</sup> in the western US. Rangeland scientists blaming ecological mismanagement on the emotionality of wild horse advocates while ignoring the violent history of right-wing militias with close ties to the ranching community — as displayed, for example, in the Sagebrush Rebellion<sup>10</sup> of the 1970s and 80s and in subsequent rage-fuelled populist land use uprisings — struck us as a troubling though revealing blind spot in this literature.

Writing as interpretive human–animal studies scholars whose research combines multispecies ethnography with theoretical reflection, we investigate contemporary public contestation about what — and whose — knowledge counts in the spatiotemporal events which the BLM calls “wild horse gathers” and which advocates, less euphemistically and more accurately, call wild horse roundups and removals. Wild horse roundups and removals, following Rafi Youatt,

7 See Wiles and Thompson, “Who’s Who”.

8 See Hampton, “Range Wars and White Privilege”.

9 Martin et al., “Political Ecology”, 227.

10 See Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger*.

operate as sites of interspecies politics that feature “the intermingling [...] both of *actual* creatures and of *ideas* about these creatures.”<sup>11</sup> We trace how this intermingling of facts and values in these spaces generates claims-making about wild horses and their governance, and how these claims struggle for public recognition and political credibility. Our empirical material stems primarily from more than two dozen roundups and removals carried out between 2020 and 2022. In practical terms, the BLM’s ramping up of removals in the very recent past has re-energized public debate about the future of wild horses on public lands; a debate that is documented online and accessible to researchers. In political terms, the BLM’s unapologetic enthusiasm for drastically reducing wild horse herds during the Biden presidency highlights the public lands management system’s relative insulation from electoral control and from partisan influence. On the one hand, engaging the contemporary debate reminds us (discouragingly enough) of the persistence in public lands management of settler-colonial ideologies that have for many decades structured who belongs and who does not belong on western rangelands. On the other hand, the contemporary debate holds clues about ways to challenge the ongoing exclusion of historically marginalized human and nonhuman animal communities from having a say in US public lands management and nature conservation.

As interpretive social scientists, we study political meaning-making by actors whose public narratives reflect not just some rationalist conception of political interests but also if not primarily their fundamental values. Facts matter, but they are deeply, inextricably embedded in affective relations. As human–animal studies scholars, we take an expansive, more-than-human view of who is capable of acting politically. Thus, we do not approach sites of interspecies politics as neutral observers but, rather, as scholar-advocates with an eye to gauging the capacity of political contestation to better incorporate the voices of nonhuman animals. Crucially, as noted above, gendered affective relations take centre stage in the instances of interspecies political meaning-making we investigate in this study. As

11 Youatt, “Interspecies Politics”, 241.

we shall see, the starkly gendered experiences of wild horse roundups and removals are consistent with the affective logic of nature conservation more generally: “Mainstream conservation discourses position care for animals as feminine and emotional, while privileging a very different human–animal relationship based in masculine, rational concern for species.”<sup>12</sup> What our analysis adds to human–animal studies scholars’ understanding of the political function of emotion is a nuanced account of the avowal and disavowal of affect in wild horse roundups and removals, and a compelling story of how affective responses to wild horses in these traumatizing spaces strive to uphold as well as to subvert existing human-to-human and human–animal political hierarchies. Wild horse roundups and removals, for all their heavy-handed law enforcement swagger, generate not only violence and exclusion but also, thanks to the tireless interventions of advocates, empathy and care across species lines. A reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from twenty-eight contemporary roundups and removals reveals that the BLM’s disavowal of emotion serves to place both wild horses and wild horse advocates in the same subaltern category of being destructive, disruptive, and out of place — in short, “feral”. In mainstream conservation science and policy, a formerly domesticated feral species reproducing outside human control is typically valued less than other, usually “native” species.<sup>13</sup> Politically, labelling a species as feral is a delegitimizing move that often marks the species as expendable in the name of conservation interests.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the entire field of “invasion biology” revolves around attempts, often with scant evidence,<sup>15</sup> to pin negative economic and ecological impacts on introduced species. Wild horse activists’ engagement with affective relations is both more complex and more ambivalent than the BLM’s. At times, advocates exercise emotional restraint in an effort to defuse attempts by anti-horse interests to disparage wild horse advocacy as mere sentimentality. However, activists’ ecofeminist

12 McCubbin and Van Patter, “Trophy Hunters & Crazy Cat Ladies,” 1327.

13 See Hill et al., “Uncivilized Behaviors”.

14 See Celermajer, “Illegible Animal”; Clancy, “More-than-Human Territoriality”.

15 See Sagoff, “Fact and Value in Invasion Biology”.



practice of politically engaged “witnessing”<sup>16</sup> of roundups and removals from a position of “entangled empathy”<sup>17</sup> doubles down on more-than-human affective attachments precisely to resist the BLM’s double-feralization of wild horses and the humans who care for them, by establishing that wild horses are grievable as individuals who maintain bonds of family and friendship, have ecological value, and participate in interspecies kinship relations.

Section I explicates our theoretical framework for decoding the nexus of affect and gender in the politics of wild horse management. In Section II, we describe the research setting and explain our methods of data collection and analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis of affect and gender in wild horse politics, presented in Section III, examines the struggle for public recognition and political credibility in terms of four major themes in our data: protecting ecological integrity, regulating horses’ numbers, listening to nonhuman others, and debating advocacy strategies. We close by discussing how improved understanding of the dynamics of gender and affect in wild horse politics helps clarify pathways toward a more compassionate coexistence with wild horse herds.

## **I. Theoretical Framework: Affect/Gender Nexus in Interspecies Politics**

We approach wild horse roundups and removals as sites of interspecies politics<sup>18</sup> at which actual wild horses and ideas about them interact with human actors motivated by diametrically opposed logics and rationales concerning the presence of wild horses on US public lands: government workers and contractors who perform and supervise the work of catching and removing the horses as well as wild horse advocate-observers who document the process as best they can under conditions set by BLM personnel. Participants’ affective responses to wild horses fundamentally shape “the logics and rationales that are used to either support or denounce their presence on

16 See Gillespie, “Witnessing Animal Others”.

17 See Gruen, *Entangled Empathy*.

18 Youatt, “Interspecies Politics”, 241.

the land.”<sup>19</sup> By tracing how distinctive ways of knowing and relating to wild horses produce, more often than not, exclusion and violence but also, at times, empathy and care across species lines we hope to develop a deeper understanding of the role of affect and gender in upholding as well as in subverting established power relations and political hierarchies in disputes about who controls western US rangelands.

The role of affect both in the construction of knowledge about non-human animals and in the spaces where species meet has been a fruitful area of social science inquiry.<sup>20</sup> Ecofeminists call for incorporating the voices of nonhuman animals into political discourse and public policy by “listening to animals, paying emotional attention” to what they are telling us.<sup>21</sup> And pioneering conservation scientists highlight the importance of emotions for knowing nonhuman animals more fully.<sup>22</sup> This research has delivered two significant insights about why affect matters in the study of interspecies politics. First, rationality and objectivity are themselves feelings.<sup>23</sup> This implies, among other things, that reason is always already informed by affect, and that placing reason and emotion in different boxes to protect some notion of unbiased objectivity is to set up a false choice.<sup>24</sup> Second, many nonhuman animals experience inner lives and social relationships rich in emotions.<sup>25</sup> Just as no plausible ac-

19 Clancy et al., “Free-Roaming Donkeys”, 1200.

20 See Candea, “Carlos the Meerkat”; Blue, “Public Attunement”; Bruckner et al., “Naturecultures”; Greenhough and Roe, “Attuning to Laboratory Animals”; Lorimer, “Non-human Charisma”; McCubbin and Van Patter, “Trophy Hunters”; Whitney, “Tangled Up in Knots”.

21 Donovan, “Feminism and the Treatment of Animals”, 305–07. See also Birke, “Intimate Familiarities?”; Blattner et al., “Animal Agency in Community”; Hamilton and Taylor, *Ethnography after Humanism*; Meijer, *When Animals Speak*.

22 See Ramp and Bekoff, “Compassion”; Wallach et al., “When All Life Counts”.

23 See Milton, *Loving Nature*.

24 See Hooper et al., “Anti-Cull Activists”.

25 See Bekoff and Pierce, *Wild Justice*; Coulter, “Challenging Subjects”; Kret et al., “My Fear Is Not”; Williams, “Secret Lives of Horses”. Peer-reviewed studies of wild horse ethology are rare, primarily due to lack of interest in and funding for non-applied research on introduced species. Studies of wild horse social dynamics must invariably justify their existence in terms of population management objectives; for example, Mendoça et al., “Population Characteristics of Feral Horses”. Given that wild horse populations survive without human intervention in many parts of the world, domestication does not appear to have fundamentally altered horse behaviour, however.

count of human reason can ignore the role of emotion in constructing and contesting knowledge claims,<sup>26</sup> denying the affective capacities of nonhuman animals obscures the complexity of their lived experiences.<sup>27</sup> It is not merely insight and understanding, however, that are diminished when emotions are disavowed. Disavowal is also closely intertwined with the production of injustice. Bureaucratically rational ways of apprehending the world have a way of silencing the voices of marginalized human and nonhuman communities and of cementing the unjust relations of power responsible for their oppression and exploitation.<sup>28</sup>

In roundups and removals, these experiences of injustice are often gendered. For example, in the BLM's conception the problem of wild horses figures primarily as one of "overabundance", an ostensibly scientific diagnosis that implies the need for drastic herd reductions. However, rangeland scientists and public lands managers are not content with vilifying the animals' presence on public lands. They also claim for themselves the moral high ground of professional responsibility — as signalled by their (rationally determined) willingness to kill horses — while infantilizing advocates' interspecies empathy as nostalgic sentimentality, as evidenced by the double-feralization of wild horses *and* of wild horse advocates permeating our data. The political function of this double-feralization, we contend, is not only to set up wild horses for removal but also to silence unruly wild horse advocates.

The advocates, for their part, respond to this masculinist double-feralization by tying the normative political potential of emotionally engaged storytelling, such as publicly grieving wild horses' loss of freedom, to the practice of witnessing as a political act. Witnessing, Kathryn Gillespie explains, differs from more detached modes of documentation in its justice-oriented political motivation and response to the suffering of others: witnessing "requires a political

26 See Lakoff, "Why It Matters".

27 See Fraser-Celin and Hovorka, "Compassionate Conservation"; Rizzolo and Bradshaw, "Nonhuman Animal Nations".

28 See Taylor and Fraser, "The Cow Project".

engagement with the subject’s embodied experience.”<sup>29</sup> Witnessing, in this context, does not necessarily restrict itself to the individual: documenting the suffering in often unhealthy conditions of thousands of captured horses corralled in cramped holding pens is as much part of advocates’ action repertoire as reporting individual experiences. Emotionally engaged witnessing cuts through anonymizing concepts of “population” and “overabundance” by storying wild horses as members of distinctive social groups and as individuals inhabiting a particular home place.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, witnessing helps make caring and grieving for nonhuman others socially intelligible, thereby exposing and critiquing unjust power relations and hierarchies. Empathetically attending to another’s experience of suffering and wellbeing—the blend of emotion and cognition the feminist animal ethicist Lori Gruen calls “entangled empathy”—does more than that, however. Advocates’ attunement to the lived experience of wild horses, we contend, also prefigures more compassionate forms of coexistence with wild horse herds.

## II. Methodology

### The Research Setting: Roundups and Removals as Sites of Interspecies Politics

The wild horses who inhabit US public lands are largely confined to BLM-managed herd management areas (HMA) scattered across ten states in the Intermountain West.<sup>31</sup> Some wild horses are also found on other federal lands, such as tracts of land managed by the National Forest Service and the National Park Service, as well as on Native lands where federal protections and population management targets do not apply. In 2013, horse slaughter became illegal in the United States, and horses from non-BLM and non-USFS herds still sent to slaughter are exported to Mexico and Canada. Navajo Nation, for example, is home to some 40,000 wild horses, and their management is a divisive topic, even though all sides acknowledge the

29 Gillespie, “Witnessing Animal Others”, 573.

30 See Wallach et al., “Recognizing Animal Personhood”.

31 Bureau of Land Management, “Herd Management Areas”, <https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/herd-management/herd-management-areas>.

sacredness of the horse in Diné culture.<sup>32</sup> As Kelsey John explains, Diné “‘traditionalists’ claim that the horse’s sacred position in Navajo epistemology and philosophy means the tribe should not round up and sell horses for slaughter, and on the other side, ‘nontraditionalists’ [...] advocate for the round up in order to alleviate the effects of feral horses on rangeland, homesites, and water.”<sup>33</sup> Though lethal control is not a management option on BLM-managed land, the agency is implementing an aggressive agenda of removing wild horses from many of its 177 HMAs. Between 2020 and 2022, approximately 20,000 wild horses were moved to long term warehousing in helicopter roundups and removals, reducing the number of horses remaining to about 80,000. These operations, which have been conducted for decades, follow a standard template. The public is alerted to impending roundups by publication of notice-and-comment periods for area management plans in which regional BLM offices make their case for reducing herd sizes to an “appropriate management level” (AML) determined by the agency. This thirty-day comment period is waived in the case of so-called “emergency” herd reductions (undertaken under the pretext of extreme drought) that require only a public announcement of the planned roundup. The BLM is required, however, to make the events themselves accessible to the public, and wild horse advocates often attend as observers. Public observation points are generally set up in a place up to a mile away from the trap site, and advocates frequently report situations of poor visibility of the trap that they contend is intentional.

Private contractors provide the necessary personnel and logistics: managers, wranglers along with their horses, and helicopter pilots as well as helicopters, trucks, stock trailers, and the equipment needed to set up temporary corrals, pens, and chutes that funnel

32 Outside Native territories, Indigenous perspectives have had little influence on management of introduced species or on North American conservation more generally. See Bhattacharyya and Larson, “The Need for Indigenous Voices”. Decolonizing conservation is a complex undertaking that requires not just rethinking existing approaches but cultivating networks for collaborating with Indigenous scholars and practitioners, without harming Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. See Hessami et al., “Indigenizing the North American Model”; Morales et al., “Redefining American Conservation”.

33 John, “Animal Colonialism”, 58.

galloping horses into the traps. The trap site is the focal point of a roundup: a fenced pen that is open at one end to a wide funnel made of lengths of jute. Depending on the number of horses to be removed from an HMA, a roundup may last up to a week or longer, with adjustments based on weather conditions. Roundups begin early in the morning, as the helicopter pilot sets off to locate bands of horses. Once located, the pilot flies low to the ground behind the horses, guiding them towards the trap site as they retreat from the perceived threat, a distance that may range from a mile or so to ten miles, depending on where the horses were found. Advocates only get to witness the final stretch that the horses travel into the jute funnels and into the traps, at which time they are generally seen galloping, arriving sweating and breathing heavily.

As the helicopter chases the horses into the trap, wranglers are on site to take over. Some on horseback may ride out to retrieve those horses who have been unable to keep up with a running pace whether because they are injured or are very young or older, and may rope or otherwise herd these individuals towards the trap. As the gate slams shut, horses are packed tightly and some may panic, trying to jump out over the fencing. Small foals are at risk of being trampled or injured. Wranglers on the ground at the trap quickly begin to sort the horses, separating mares and foals from stallions. Horses are routed through a series of corrals and chutes and moved into large stock trailers. The trailers can hold up to a dozen or more horses at a time, and once full they drive loads of horses to BLM-owned holding facilities. Once at the holding facility, horses are unloaded together into pens where they await further processing. Over the next few days to weeks they will be catalogued, branded, and vaccinated. Horses determined to suffer from physical ailments (e.g., “club foot”) the BLM deems a barrier to transport are shot at the trap site; others (e.g., “blindness in one eye”) may be killed upon arrival at the holding facility. The survivors will settle into life in this holding facility, sharing a small unsheltered enclosure space with dozens of other horses, many of whom they already know. BLM personnel provide feed and water. Upon completion of some (but not all) roundups, a limited number

of horses are released back to the range. However, since supply far outstrips demand for adoption of BLM-managed horses, tens of thousands of animals live out their lives in holding facilities or on government contracted ranches.

### Data Collection: 28 Roundups and Removals

In order to analyse how affect, gender, and species interact in these spaces, we gathered publicly available text data on 28 roundups and removals conducted between 2020 and 2022, in 7 states (California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming.) For each event we collected four sets of data: BLM publications (N 34), reports compiled by wild horse advocacy organizations (N 122), news coverage (N 116), and social media threads (N 43) in wild-horse-related Facebook groups and YouTube channels (see Table 1).

### Data Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to explore patterns of participant meanings in our data.<sup>34</sup> Thematic analysis is an interpretive methodology wherein researchers immerse themselves in the data to familiarize themselves with their depth and breadth while actively searching for patterns and meanings. This process is reflexive in that it involves moving from reviewing unstructured data to developing ideas about what is going on in the data. Unlike the frequency word counts of content analysis, thematic analysis aims to uncover participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and practices, the social processes that influence and shape particular phenomena, the explicit and implicit norms governing particular practices, as well as the social construction of meaning and the representation of social objects in particular texts and contexts.<sup>35</sup>

We proceeded from inductively coding our text data to building themes from these codes in a four-step process. Given our interest in understanding participant meanings, we selected code labels that stayed close to the wording of the texts we examined.

34 See Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis"; Guest et al., *Applied Thematic Analysis*.

35 See Braun and Clarke, *Thematic Analysis*.

**Table 1: Roundups and Removals 2020-2022**

<b>HMA</b>	<b>BLM</b>	<b>Advocates</b>	<b>News Media</b>	<b>Social Media</b>
Barren Valley Complex, OR	4	6	3	4
Beaty Butte, OR	1	3	1	1
Centennial, CA	2	4	1	1
Challis, ID	1	3	6	2
Conger, UT	1	4	1	2
Desatoya, NV	1	4	2	1
Diamond Hills Complex, NV	1	5	4	1
Eagle, NV	1	5	2	1
Four Mile, ID	1	5	3	N/A
Fox-Lake Range, NV	1	4	2	N/A
Jackson Mountains, NV	1	6	8	1
Maverick-Medicine, NV	1	3	1	1
Nevada Wild Horse Range, NV	2	2	N/A	N/A
Onaqui Mountain, UT	2	10	6	1
Owyhee Complex, NV	1	4	4	1
Paisley Desert, OR	1	2	N/A	1
Palomino Butte, OR	1	6	4	2
Pancake Complex, NV	1	5	5	3
Red Desert Complex, WY	1	5	4	4
Rock Springs, WY	1	3	6	5
Sand Wash Basin, CO	1	8	32	4
Saylor Creek, ID	1	2	2	N/A
Shawave Mountains, NV	1	4	4	N/A
Silver King, NV	1	5	5	2
Stinkingwater, OR	1	4	1	2
Sulphur, UT	1	5	4	N/A
Surprise Complex, CA	1	3	2	2
West Douglas, CO	1	2	3	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>43</b>



First, the four-person research team jointly coded text data pertaining to a sample of four randomly selected roundups, generating some 50 codes. Second, using these codes, Cassidy Ellis then coded the entire archive (N 315) using NVivo, a software package for organizing and analysing qualitative data. Abigail Del Grosso independently performed a second round of coding. The team then resolved any divergent coding choices, merged poorly differentiated codes, and revised misleading code labels. Thus, coding was a reflexive process that involved moving back and forth between the texts and the codes, separately and jointly, until coding was judged to be complete.

Third, each team member independently compiled the coded statements in our dataset into broader themes<sup>36</sup> that captured participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices in the context of wild horse roundups and removals. This process of organizing codes into analytic themes was informed by the ways NVivo helped us visualize the centrality of certain codes and the relationships among them. In a final step, we determined that our codes converged on four major themes. Pro-horse and anti-horse discourses imbue each of these themes with different, often diametrically opposed meanings. Likewise, human actors in wild horse politics accept or repudiate affect in complex ways, primarily across the pro-/anti-horse divide but also, at times, within each system of meaning.

Moving from reviewing unstructured data to generating broader themes in such an elaborate process yielded four motifs around which the political struggle between the gendered avowal and disavowal of affect in wild horse roundups and removals revolves: protecting ecological integrity, regulating horses' numbers, listening to nonhuman others, and debating advocacy strategies. In what follows, we discuss how the federal public lands management system's double-feralization of wild horses and wild horse advocates, as well as the insurgent affective relations of care that resist and subvert this framing, play out across these four major themes.

36 See Creswell, *Research Design*, Chapter 9: Qualitative Methods

### III. Interspecies Affective Relations at Wild Horse Roundups and Removals

#### Protecting Ecological Integrity

The Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 directs the BLM to maintain HMAs as multi-use. The multiple-use doctrine compels the agency to balance wildlife species diversity and livestock grazing with wild horse and burro habitat. It also mandates that horse and burro populations be managed to “maintain a thriving natural ecological balance”, but at the “minimum feasible level”. The precise meaning of these terms is ambiguous and politically contested.<sup>37</sup> Competing storylines of nativeness and belonging position wild horses either as a vital component of the rangeland ecosystem, as wild horse advocates contend, or as a threat to rangeland ecological integrity, as the agency asserts. In framing wild horses as ecosystem destroyers, the BLM relies on data generated by an academic rangeland science and management enterprise that sees the presence of horses on public land as a threat to ecological integrity. Echoing Malthusian anxieties familiar from campaigns targeting unwanted species such as suburban white-tailed deer<sup>38</sup> and Canada geese,<sup>39</sup> “feral” horses are portrayed as reproducing at unsustainable rates and, thus, as ecologically destructive and worth less than species such as native wildlife and agricultural livestock that are regarded as more legitimate. Advocacy organizations such as the American Wild Horse Campaign (AWHC) counter that the BLM’s insistence that “wild horses must be reduced to unscientifically low population levels in order to manage for a thriving natural ecological balance” turns wild horses into ecological scapegoats.<sup>40</sup>

If rangeland health were a prime concern for the BLM, advocates contend, surely the agency would moderate its support for public lands livestock grazing and stop diverting forage and water to sheep and cattle after removing horses, ostensibly due to lack of forage and

37 See Danvir, “Multiple-Use Management”; Boyce et al., “Causes and Consequences,” 157.

38 See Connors and Gianotti, “Becoming Killable”.

39 See Clancy, “More-than-Human Territoriality”.

40 See AWHC, “Emergency Roundups”.

water. Advocates note that the economics of roundups and removals run counter to BLM claims about having to remove horses in order to protect rangeland health. Not only are private contractors paid large sums of money to capture, ship, and warehouse the horses off-range, but the areas from which the horses have been removed are typically opened to greater numbers of grazing sheep and cattle than before. The BLM seeks to deflect criticism of skewing multiple-use management in favour of livestock interests by suggesting that “[c]attle or livestock grazing has actually declined on public rangelands 34 percent since the ’70s.”<sup>41</sup> Advocates counter that some HMAs appear to be managed *principally* for livestock. In south-eastern Oregon’s Barren Valley Complex HMA, for example, advocates discovered that wild horses were allocated “12% of the authorized forage, with 88% going to privately owned cattle and sheep.”<sup>42</sup> Here, “the forage diverted to livestock could support an additional 2,250 horses across the three [Barren Valley Complex] HMAs. The combined AML [appropriate management level] could increase from 892 to 3,142. The problem is public-lands ranching, not overpopulation.”<sup>43</sup> Advocates report that “more and more cattle and sheep, especially sheep, [have] started showing up” following roundups.<sup>44</sup>

The BLM also frames roundups as being pro-horse, such that by removing wild horses now they are preventing wild horses from going hungry and thirsty in the future. A BLM District Manager explains that they “conduct gathers like this to ensure that the health of the rangelands and the wild horses are not at risk due to herd overpopulation and severe drought conditions.”<sup>45</sup> Herd reductions, the agency claims, help “maintain a thriving ecological balance that supports healthy horses on healthy rangelands that provide adequate habitat, forage and water for horses, wildlife, including Greater Sage-grouse, and livestock.”<sup>46</sup> Advocates dispute the BLM’s claims that horses are rounded

41 See Hottle, “Wild Horse Gather Concludes”.

42 Duffy, “Sheepshead Wild Horses”.

43 Duffy, “Barren Valley Gather”.

44 Naumann, “Born to Be Wild”.

45 “Pancake Complex wild horse gather underway”, *Lincoln County Record*, 25 January 2022, <https://lccentral.com/2022/01/25/pancake-complex-wild-horse-gather-underway/>

46 Chast, “BLM Rounds Up”.

up for their own good. The agency argues that “life out on the range can be pretty tough, and they don’t live as long as they do in domestic life” because “a large percentage of the horses are emaciated and dehydrated.”<sup>47</sup> Advocates, however, keep documenting the routine removal of horses in good physical condition.

Unlike the BLM, advocates regard wild horses as a vital part of the rangeland ecosystem. They cast doubt on BLM claims that fewer than 100,000 wild horses confined to, at most, ten percent of federal public land are capable of degrading entire ecosystems. In questioning claims of ecological harmfulness, advocates point to the ancient evolutionary history of wild horse species in North America<sup>48</sup> and marshal evidence that free-roaming horses sometimes have positive impacts on rangeland ecology.<sup>49</sup> They also articulate a non-instrumental, cultural conception of equine belonging that sidesteps the native/non-native question entirely.<sup>50</sup> That is, advocates do not pathologize wild horses’ history of de-domestication, instead imbuing the sheer grit of multigenerational survival in sparse grasslands with a kind of naturalized immigrant status.<sup>51</sup> Where anti-horse discourse invokes wild horses’ descent from livestock as leverage to weaken their status as protected wildlife, advocates flip this narrative to establish wild horses’ right to remain on the land: “ROUNDING UP is not the answer. ...! These Animals ARE ON THEIR GIVEN LANDS.”<sup>52</sup> The BLM’s and advocates’ positions on the ecological impact of wild horses are each entangled with incommensurable conceptions of the animals’ right to inhabit these landscapes. One might think that divergent interpretations of horses’ health should be simple to settle empirically: a given animal is either found to be in poor physical condition or not. However, matters of fact tell only a small part of

47 Chast, “BLM Rounds Up”.

48 See Haile et al., “Ancient DNA”.

49 See Lundgren et al., “Equids Engineer”.

50 See Wallach et al. “When All Life Counts”.

51 See Bhattacharyya et al., “The ‘Wild’ or ‘Feral’ Distraction”.

52 Joan Webb, “ALL WRONG.....”, 7 August 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “The Bureau of Land Management plans to begin an ‘emergency’ helicopter roundup of 296 wild horses”, Facebook, 5 August 2021. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/10159651378233054?comment\\_id=10159654129008054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/10159651378233054?comment_id=10159654129008054).

the story. While the claim that today's wild herds descend from domestic livestock is uncontested, for example, each side's conclusions about the *meaning* of de-domestication for the animals' belonging on the range could not be more different.

### Regulating Horses' Numbers

The construct of “excess” horses drives the BLM's overpopulation narrative. The agency claims that the 80,000 horses estimated to inhabit BLM-managed public lands in 2022 are still “more than three times what is sustainable and healthy for the land and the animals”<sup>53</sup> and that unmanaged herds double in size every four years, posing an “existential threat” to America's public lands.<sup>54</sup> Advocates counter that the agency's AMLs are unscientifically low, referencing a National Academy of Sciences study which concluded that BLM's research on population size is “not transparent to stakeholders, supported by scientific information or amenable to adaptation with new information and environmental and social change.”<sup>55</sup> Some advocates believe that the BLM has betrayed the public interest by engineering a *de facto* takeover of Western public lands by agricultural and mining interests. The BLM, for its part, affirms that roundups are here to stay. According to one Wild Horse and Burro Program supervisor, gathers are “kind of, I guess you'd say, the purpose of our program.”<sup>56</sup> That horses are no longer present in several HMAs reinforces advocates' impression that the BLM is not motivated by ecology, but by a political mission to “depopulat[e] the West of its wild horses and burros herd by herd.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite their scepticism about the BLM's inflated population growth projections and aggressive herd reductions, advocates acknowledge that few natural predators live alongside wild horses, thanks to a combination of permissive predator sport hunting regulations and extirpation of cougars, wolves, and grizzly bears in the name of

53 Draplin, “Federal Land Managers”.

54 Philipps, “A Mustang Crisis Looms”.

55 Naumann, “Born to Be Wild”.

56 Chast, “BLM Rounds Up”.

57 Sonner, “US Plans More Wild Horse Roundups”.

government-sanctioned “predator control”.<sup>58</sup> As such, and in light of horses’ confinement in the finite spaces of HMAs, many advocacy organizations reluctantly accept some practices that limit horses’ population growth. Support for fertility control in wild horse management is a small area of overlap between BLM and advocate beliefs, but these stakeholders diverge dramatically in how they think regulating horses’ numbers should be carried out.

The most widely used equine fertility control method involves injecting mares with PZP, short for porcine zona pellucida, an injectable immunocontraceptive that is effective in a range of ungulate species, including horses.<sup>59</sup> Many advocates argue that PZP is a safe, proven, and effective method in addition to being humane, non-invasive, and non-traumatic. For these advocates, the use of PZP is an ethical choice for population regulation because of its minimal impact on horses’ social behaviour. In fact, there are several examples of collaboration between advocacy organizations and regional BLM offices to deploy PZP, and advocates emphasize that these kinds of collaborations are less costly to taxpayers than expensive roundups and the subsequent long-term warehousing of captured horses. A number of advocate organizations, including higher-profile groups like AWHC, have called on the BLM to collaborate more extensively through public–private partnerships to expand the use of PZP in herd management across the system. Advocates further say that building this infrastructure is needed because existing volunteer-run PZP programs are not really widely replicable or sustainable: “What needs to change is, instead of relying on a bunch of old ladies to go out and dart like me, they need to hire people to do it.”<sup>60</sup> PZP administration, if adopted more widely, would be an example of more compassionate wild horse management because roundups and removals could then be largely avoided. However, such proposals have been rebuffed by the BLM. Echoing the biopolitical “massification”<sup>61</sup> of animal bodies in mainstream conservation science discourse,

58 See Bergstrom et al., “License to Kill”.

59 See Gruenberg, *Wild Horse Dilemma*.

60 Stella Trueblood, quoted in Anderson, “Branded”.

61 Sutton and Taylor, “Managing the Borders”.

the agency claims it is impractical to dart large herds, among other things “due to the fact that many horses look the same”, a statement that betrays a belief that horses are interchangeable and indistinguishable from one another.<sup>62</sup> The BLM also points to the likely need for labour-intensive, costly bait-trapping in order to dart mares unaccustomed to human presence after their first experience of being shot with a dart gun. The existence of volunteer-run PZP programs does not prevent roundups from happening when the agency deems them necessary, as the Sand Wash Basin HMA experience shows.<sup>63</sup> Says one wild horse photographer: “I will probably never be able to emotionally come back here. I mean, this place is going to be like a graveyard to me.”<sup>64</sup> By cooperating with BLM on a few birth control programs, but entirely on BLM’s terms, advocates have traded their volunteer labour for a largely symbolic form of “access without influence” that has left existing management practices intact, a classic case of co-optation of oppositional social movements by state institutions.<sup>65</sup> Even more so than the irreconcilable perspectives on ecological integrity discussed above, limited cooperation on fertility control — requiring, at a minimum, a shared belief in its efficacy — leaves intact the underlying affective relations wherein herds figure either as an aggregate to be manipulated or as a community whose wellbeing requires attending to the social dynamics among its members. The depth of these incommensurabilities is revealed more fully in the next section.

### Listening to Nonhuman Others

The two affective regimes we have identified — treating wild horses as an undifferentiated mass versus attending to their “fleshy bodily and emotional susceptibilities, potentialities and vulnerabilities”<sup>66</sup> — constitute starkly contrasting human–animal relationalities. For the BLM, wild horses figure as objects of managerial govern-

62 Steve Leonard, the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro manager for Colorado, quoted in LaConte, “Largest Wild Horse Roundup”.

63 See Hunold and Britton, “Wild and Free”.

64 Meg Frederick, quoted in Garcia, “Helicopters”.

65 See Dryzek et al., *Green States and Social Movements*.

66 Greenhough and Roe, “Attuning to Laboratory Animals”, 371.

ance, as indicated by this detached estimate of risks associated with a proposed roundup at Sand Wash Basin HMA: “the helicopter roundup would be stressful to the herd and possibly fatal to 1.1%, or in this case about eight horses.”<sup>67</sup> At times, the BLM tries to temper the brutality of helicopter roundups: “The pilots, I like to refer to the pilots as the border collie in the sky where they’re simply herding the horses towards the trap.”<sup>68</sup> Despite such transparent attempts to dissociate its practices of capturing wild horses from the violence involved,<sup>69</sup> the BLM’s technocratic calculus of acceptable losses fundamentally collides with advocates’ grieving for horses who will “spend their lives in captivity”<sup>70</sup>, often “under terrible conditions”<sup>71</sup>. Advocates express outrage at the rough handling of horses at trap sites: “Heartbreaking! These are wildlife not livestock! And they are our defenseless beautiful horses and burros. . .”<sup>72</sup> Foals being “chased, roped, and brought into the trap by the riders” are sometimes separated from their mothers.<sup>73</sup> Advocates point “to the dangers inherent in running newborn foals and heavily pregnant mares, who could slip their foals because of the stress”<sup>74</sup> and denounce roundups being undertaken in extreme weather conditions.

The BLM claims roundups and removals are as safe as possible, yet advocates believe helicopter roundups that cause horses to “break limbs, crash into fences, and die of exhaustion” are “devastating and

67 Goodland, “Wild Horse Advocates”.

68 Hottle, “Wild Horse Gather Concludes”.

69 Mazhary, “Distancing Animal Death”, 3.

70 Maffly, “Onaqui Wild Horses”.

71 Lynette Radel, “All these roundups going on”, 31 August 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “The Bureau of Land Management plans to capture and remove 1,900 wild horses from the Barren Valley Complex”, Facebook, 31 August 2021. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/10159700833388054/?comment\\_id=10159701008133054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/10159700833388054/?comment_id=10159701008133054).

72 Helen Norvell, “Heartbreaking!”, 23 August 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “Conger HMA (Utah) roundup ends with 231 horses captured, 1 dead”. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid0LC4J43wUxxYKeb5kGkmJhTo5XZDAMrLqbkKrtiffPzbe8TjSk2evELQcD1CyT9qyl?comment\\_id=10159686656313054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid0LC4J43wUxxYKeb5kGkmJhTo5XZDAMrLqbkKrtiffPzbe8TjSk2evELQcD1CyT9qyl?comment_id=10159686656313054).

73 AWHC, “Roundup Report: Barren Valley Complex”.

74 “Judge Restricts Helicopter Use in Jackson Roundup”, *Horsetalk.co.nz*, 22 June 2012, <https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2012/06/22/judge-restricts-helicopter-use-jackson-mountain-roundup/>.



cruel”.<sup>75</sup> In the October 2021 Barren Valley Complex, OR roundup a 6-year old mare died of a broken neck after bashing into a trap corral panel.<sup>76</sup> In addition to suffering fatal injuries, some captured horses are shot on site for what the BLM terms pre-existing conditions. Advocates counter that it is unnecessary to kill horses who have evidently survived for years despite conditions like club foot or blindness in one eye. Such killings provoke anger, grief, and, at times, sarcasm. A social media comment on the killing of captured horses at the Barren Valley Complex notes: “[W]ell, there’s 27 horses that BLM won’t have to feed for life. So win-win in BLM’s eyes.”<sup>77</sup> Another comments: “More BS from BLM as to ‘pre-existing’ conditions. They run them until one or more has a broken leg or worse then ‘put them down!’ They’re INHUMANE DIRT BAGS!!!!!! All were doing fine until being chased for miles!!!”<sup>78</sup> What the BLM defends as humane treatment advocates denounce as animal abuse.

Advocates also detail mistreatment and declining health following roundups, including “heavy reliance on the electric [cattle] prods” and overcrowded holding pens that cause horses to become stressed and jump on top of each other.<sup>79</sup> A Sand Wash Basin HMA observer reports: “They’re in a cage now, stressed out, scared to death and packed like sardines. . .the accidents and deaths and things like that, it doesn’t happen when they’re running. It happens right now.”<sup>80</sup> Confinement in poorly managed holding facilities, moreover, facilitates the spread of infectious disease. For example, 145 horses captured

75 “Feds to Round Up America’s Most Iconic Wild Horse Herd: Say No!” *EveryAction*, [March 2019], [https://secure.everyaction.com/bCqrx780WE6w9CX2iDyT\\_A2](https://secure.everyaction.com/bCqrx780WE6w9CX2iDyT_A2).

76 AWHC, “Roundup Report: Barren Valley Complex”.

77 Jan Morse, “[W]ell, there’s 27 horses”, 8 November, 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “The Bureau of Land Management on Friday ended an ‘emergency’ helicopter roundup continued on the Barren Valley Complex”. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02xttTHjApizd1KyK5haEfyKfG82tYQo6uS7sUHUSuTeSBSDwUt6TcZTRDLY5Zez97l?comment\\_id=1015983111128054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02xttTHjApizd1KyK5haEfyKfG82tYQo6uS7sUHUSuTeSBSDwUt6TcZTRDLY5Zez97l?comment_id=1015983111128054).

78 Donna Canada, “More BS from BLM”, 9 November 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “The Bureau of Land Management on Friday ended an ‘emergency’ helicopter roundup”. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02xttTHjApizd1KyK5haEfyKfG82tYQo6uS7sUHUSuTeSBSDwUt6TcZTRDLY5Zez97l?comment\\_id=10159832595033054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02xttTHjApizd1KyK5haEfyKfG82tYQo6uS7sUHUSuTeSBSDwUt6TcZTRDLY5Zez97l?comment_id=10159832595033054).

79 AWHC, “Roundup Report: Barren Valley Complex”.

80 Garcia, “Helicopters”.

in the West Douglas HMA roundup died of equine flu at the Cañon City, CO holding facility in 2022 when BLM staff failed to vaccinate the herd in a timely manner.<sup>81</sup> That same year, the BLM's Wheatland Off-Range Corral in Wyoming experienced an outbreak of strangles, affecting more than half of the 2,750 horses held there and killing 0.8% of them.<sup>82</sup> In advocates' telling, it is not life on the range but, rather, captivity that endangers horses' wellbeing.

In addition to documenting physical suffering, advocates articulate horses' experiences of emotional distress based on visual and auditory cues. The trauma of family separations is a recurring theme. At Barren Valley Complex HMA, "A stallion [who] was able to evade capture and headed up the hill overlooking the trap. He looked down into the valley at his family and whinnied for them."<sup>83</sup> This same observer describes a group of horses who "were all huddled close together, confused, scared." Separated mothers and foals show obvious signs of distress: "as soon as the foal was separated it started calling for its mother, even as the trailer she was on pulled away and out of sight." Some stallions witnessing their mares and foals being loaded onto trailers at an Oregon trap site reacted as follows: "The stallions were especially attentive in this group, coming to the sides of the chute to say goodbye to their mares one last time. It was a truly heartbreaking way to start the day." In the context of bearing witness to such traumatic upheaval, advocates are buoyed by occasional expressions of defiance: "The proud stallion was separated from the rest of the herd purposefully by the helicopter in an attempt to capture his family and deter them from following him. Moments later the black stallion and his band ran towards each other and reunited before escaping up the mountain. A true freedom fighter. We love to see it!"<sup>84</sup>

For roundup operators, however, horses are little more than physical bodies to be processed as efficiently as possible; troublesome advocates who empathize with the horses, moreover, figure as emotionally

81 Brown, "Cañon City Facility".

82 Fike, "More Horses Die".

83 AWHC, "Roundup Report: Barren Valley Complex".

84 AWHC, "Roundup Report: Red Desert Complex".

disturbed interlopers. Stripping horses of their individuality and advocates of their capacity for reason delegitimizes the presence of horses on the land while infantilizing advocates' concerns. A BLM field office manager responsible for the Sand Wash Basin roundup states that he appreciates "that people are emotional about these [...] beautiful animals" but insists, in the next sentence, that "they also need to understand that it's not OK to allow the population to get up to a certain level, right on the edge, before they start to crash."<sup>85</sup> The subtle implication is that sentimentality equals femininity equals naiveté, ergo refusal to take responsibility for doing what must be done, as identified by "objective" rangeland ecological science. At roundups and removals, misogyny and the denigration by feralization of wild horses and their human advocates are deeply intertwined. Intimidation of advocates by BLM personnel, including threats of physical violence, is not unheard of, as when a male BLM state director threatened a prominent female advocate during an encounter on an HMA: "If this were the 70's or 80's you would be dragged out of your truck, brutalized, tied to a bumper and dragged around the desert until your body disintegrated. Or perhaps next year?"<sup>86</sup>

The ecofeminist political act of witnessing roundups and removals makes wild horses grievable and reveals that wild horses are themselves capable of grieving. By giving voice to the horses' distress alongside their own, advocates strive to make empathizing with non-human others socially intelligible to wider publics and, in doing so, to expose hierarchies of domination that obscure animals' suffering and justify their expendability.<sup>87</sup> Publicizing horses' traumatizing experiences brings to light a routine violence that is absent from "the facts" showcased in the BLM's public communications. Advocates refocus public attention from "excess" horses onto the physical sensations and emotional experiences of suffering nonhuman others. This mobilization of more-than-human grief resonates with an ecofeminist conception of entangled empathy<sup>88</sup> that asks humans

85 Garcia, "Helicopters".

86 Leigh, "Letter to BLM Director Neil Kornze".

87 See Blue "Public Attunement"; Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others".

88 See Gruen, *Entangled Empathy*.

to listen to the voices of nonhuman animals and to reflect on what might be learned from such communication.<sup>89</sup> Modelling that rationality and emotionality are not mutually exclusive in more-than-human relationships of kinship prefigures a more holistic epistemology; an epistemology shared by compassionate conservation scientists.<sup>90</sup>

Many wild horse advocates, especially those who attend roundups, have logged countless hours watching wild horses in their habitats, and in the course of this naturalistic observation have come to a nuanced and detailed understanding of their lives. These advocates, who are often also wild horse photographers with detailed knowledge of specific herds, know individual horses by sight and can picture a map of each horse's social relationships, and of herds' daily and seasonal habits, practices, and movements. In their recurring encounters with bands of horses they have come to know well, these photographer-advocates embrace an interspecies ethic of care and kinship, readily expressing both their affection for individual horses as well as their anger and grief when roundups are implemented. Like many wild horse photographers, Jennifer Britton became an advocate as a result of time spent getting to know individual horses as unique characters acting out lively relationships with other horses, whether as family, friends, or rivals, as shown in her image of a Sand Wash Basin HMA mare and stallion sharing an affectionate moment (Fig 2.). When horses feel like kin rather than like undifferentiated organisms, the spectre of roundups and their associated violence is a compelling call to action. After roundups have concluded and some portion of captured horses are released back into their HMAs, advocates return to observe whether and how the social dynamics of herds have changed with the loss of most of their population and a freshly skewed male-female ratio. To be sure, to affirm affective ways of knowing and relating to wild horses does not in the short term change public policy. However, sharing stories about the lives and deaths of wild horses gives meaning to marginalized lives, a precondition for challenging their continued subjugation.<sup>91</sup> That said, lean-

89 See Donovan, "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals"; Meijer, *When Animals Speak*.

90 See Wallach et al., "When All Life Counts"; Wallach et al., "Recognizing Animal Personhood".

91 Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others", 577.



**Figure 2:**

In Sand Wash Basin, a mare and stallion, part of the same family band, share an affectionate greeting.

© Jennifer Britton

ing into more-than-human affective attachments often invites dismissive responses from public lands managers. Next, we discuss how advocates, in an effort to develop political strategies that might yet help secure a future for wild horses, navigate the contradictions of defusing malicious attributions of sentimentality while upholding affective ways of knowing and relating to wild horses.

### Debating Advocacy Strategies

The strategies advocates use most frequently to challenge BLM policies are offering public input, engaging in litigation, and documenting roundups. However, advocacy campaigns have had little impact on federal management practices, even in limited areas of shared concern, such as fertility control and water provisioning. Where does this unimpressive record leave wild horse advocacy, according to advocates? For some, the failure to change policy has reinforced a deep mistrust of the BLM as hopelessly corrupt. A small minority hope to sidestep the question of federal authority altogether by articulating a libertarian vision of equine autonomy as freedom from government interference: “There’s something wrong here — these horses and this land belong to us, the people, not the Bureau of Land (Mis)Management”<sup>92</sup> On this view, wild horses are simply to be left alone.

However, non-interference does not resonate with most advocates, who are calling on one another to continue to fight for policy change. On social media, wild horse supporters urge that “writing letters, signing petitions, donating, and making calls” can improve the treatment of horses.<sup>93</sup> The BLM must solicit public input on proposed non-emergency roundups. However, many advocates who as citizens expect to have a say on public policy are frustrated by the

92 Marnie Barrett, “There’s something wrong here”, 16 October 2014, comment on American Wild Horse Campaign, “BLM has announced an emergency roundup of wild horses within the Palomino Buttes HMA in Oregon”. [https://www.facebook.com/FreeWildHorses/photos/a.119795654746757/790049484388034?comment\\_id=790139601045689](https://www.facebook.com/FreeWildHorses/photos/a.119795654746757/790049484388034?comment_id=790139601045689).

93 Mona Malone, “But take the time and do something constructive”, 7 October 2021, comment on Return to Freedom, Wild Horse Conservation, “The Bureau of Land Management on Thursday”. [https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02gahAQkhrgrwtu2UUmTXz7NPP6rZwbkUViW3NszfkTnjfs4kmLvZA7w22BJ4LsdWVCl?comment\\_id=10159767639123054&reply\\_comment\\_id=10159768252633054](https://www.facebook.com/returntofreedom/posts/pfbid02gahAQkhrgrwtu2UUmTXz7NPP6rZwbkUViW3NszfkTnjfs4kmLvZA7w22BJ4LsdWVCl?comment_id=10159767639123054&reply_comment_id=10159768252633054).

agency's persistent disregard for their ideas. Though federal agencies must seek public input and document this process, agencies have long enjoyed a fair amount of judicial deference to interpret their own rules and regulations. Even so, some advocacy organizations regularly take the BLM to court, challenging it on humane treatment and other grounds and occasionally chalking up wins that hold the agency and roundup operators accountable to animal welfare regulations.<sup>94</sup> Overall, though, litigation has not altered the core of roundup practices. However, even unsuccessful litigation forces the BLM to publicly justify disputed practices, such as the use of helicopters. Litigation also ties up agency resources. Laments one official regarding legal challenges of helicopter use: "BLM has got to increase the tools in our toolbox to manage this. When we do try to do that, oftentimes litigation comes into play."<sup>95</sup>

Outside regulatory and legal arenas, campaigners work primarily to increase public awareness. Wild horse photography, for example, relies on horses' nonhuman charisma<sup>96</sup> to publicize their plight. Among wild horse advocates are skilled photographers who use their images to reveal two distinctive manifestations of society's collective "learned invisibility"<sup>97</sup> regarding multispecies interdependencies. Images showing horses going about their lives on the range convey that they are unique individuals with distinctive personalities, interests, and interpersonal attachments to friends and family. Empathetically showcasing horses inhabiting their homes allows wild horse fans and advocates who are unable to travel to see them to "put faces to the horses 'whose freedom will be lost forever'".<sup>98</sup> Photography and videography are also employed to monitor and document conditions during roundups and at holding facilities. Given their intimate familiarity with individuals and family bands, photographers recount which horses were captured, or escaped, or were injured

94 See "Owyhee Complex Wild Horses", *Wild Horse Education* <https://wildhorseeducation.org/owyhee-complex-wild-horses/>.

95 Hottle, "Wild Horse Gather Concludes".

96 We borrow this concept from Lorimer, "Nonhuman Charisma".

97 Schlosberg, "Environmental Management".

98 Maffly, "Onaqui Wild Horses".

during helicopter runs into trap pens. They report on the conditions of individual horses as well as their collective health status when there is access to BLM-contracted holding facilities. Observer images and video footage from roundups also expose the violence of roundups and removals, showing the speed at which horses are chased into traps, acts of violence such as when foals are roped or injured, or times of panic as horses attempt to jump out of the trap corrals. Moreover, the often poor technical quality of images produced at these events—grainy and blurry as a result of being shot from long distances—unwittingly reveals that public observers are kept too far from trap sites to observe the process clearly.

Organizationally more demanding forms of political mobilization such as direct action have been used only sparingly. Prior to the 2021 Sand Wash Basin roundup, advocates held a peaceful protest in Denver where participants expressed hopes of “finally getting politicians to step forward and acknowledge that there’s something really wrong going on” with roundups.<sup>99</sup> The Onaqui herd roundup in 2021 likewise inspired organized protests, including a rally in Salt Lake City.<sup>100</sup> Unlike the well documented history of unlawful and frequently violent action by public lands ranchers against the BLM and other federal offices and officials to protest federal land management policy, direct action to subvert or sabotage roundups by wild horse advocates has not been documented.

As we have shown, anti-horse discourse disavows affect in its conception of the wild horse “overpopulation” problem, ignores contemporary acts of violence committed by public lands ranchers, and frequently denigrates advocates’ affective ways of knowing and relating to wild horses. In their struggle to balance attachment and detachment in formulating their own positions, advocates are understandably wary that their empathetic entanglement with wild horses will be weaponized against them. Specifically, advocates fear that the

99 “Colorado Governor Asks Feds to Hold Off on Planned Wild Horse Roundup in Sand Wash Basin”, CBS News Colorado, 31 August 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/jared-polis-wild-horse-roundup-sand-wash-basin-department-interior-bureau-of-land-management-deb-haaland-colorado/>.

100 Naumann, “Born to Be Wild”.



“emotional ecology”<sup>101</sup> generated by grieving for horses they have known and cared for on the range is illegible to wildlife conservation and management bureaucracies. Responses to this concern range from doubling down on affective attachments as a means to signal compassion for wild horses to foregoing, on tactical grounds, any outward display of emotion in public statements. Some contend that only the detached bureaucratic style of relating “the facts”, as it were, has any hope of swaying policy makers. They urge others that when speaking to reporters “you have to act like a press secretary, not an advocate. No emotion. No crying. No naming the foals you love. You need to offer straightforward facts.”<sup>102</sup> However, adopting the detached style of bureaucratic policymaking presupposes that public lands management governance is actually receptive to evidence rather than determined by the political influence of extractivism. There are scant indications to suggest this is the case.

However, our data also reveal a more nuanced understanding of the nexus of the political function of emotion that does not ask advocates to surrender their affective commitments. Wild horse tourism, for example, is understood by advocates to involve relating affectively to wild horses as representations of “pure Americana, unbridled freedom, power, [and] determination”.<sup>103</sup> These values serve as powerful symbols in American political rhetoric. They also undeniably have a dark provenance, intertwined as they are with the history of genocidal violence against Indigenous human communities (and extermination campaigns directed against various nonhuman species). Public lands wild horse activists, it should be acknowledged, are predominantly of Euro-American descent. There is legitimate concern that white Americans’ unreflected appeals to “Old West” tropes, however well-intentioned, turn a blind eye to historical and contemporary patterns of colonial ecological violence against Indigenous communities and cultures.<sup>104</sup> Yet, while they originate in America’s violent settler-colonial history, these values nonetheless

101 Whitney, “Tangled Up in Knots”.

102 Eckhoff, “How to Advocate Effectively”.

103 Andrea Maki, “Wild Love Preserve”, <https://www.wildlovepreserve.org/>.

104 Bacon, “Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure”.

conjure a resonant sense of more-than-human belonging that wild horse advocates can use on the behalf of the horses. For example, advocates note that geographically accessible HMAs like Sand Wash Basin and Onaqui Mountain function as popular ecotourism destinations that entice people “from all over the country to visit, observe, and photograph” wild horses.<sup>105</sup> Such encounters hold enormous normative potential. Notably, many visitors experience the horses, not as interchangeable members of an undifferentiated population, but as distinct individuals. Repeat visitors in particular are attached to individual horses and their families, including named individuals whom they look forward to meeting again during future visits.<sup>106</sup> Rather than anonymous wild horses, they are nonhuman kin who inhabit a specific home range, like the Salt Wells Creek stallion Bubba and his band (Fig. 1). Bubba experienced roundups during his long life on the range. He was captured in 2021 and then released with select other stallions. He died of a catastrophic injury in August 2023, and the news travelled quickly around wild horse advocacy spaces, accompanied by expressions of grief from around the world; many advocates and fans noted with gratitude that he died in his home rather than in an off-range holding pen.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Wild horse roundups and removals are sites of exclusion and violence as well as care and compassion. Our analysis of the interplay between avowal and disavowal of emotion in these spaces reveals how distinctly gendered, mutually incompatible ways of knowing and managing wild horses strive to uphold as well as to subvert established power relations and hierarchies. The Malthusian anxieties that mark wild horses as creatures endowed with, at best, a precarious claim to belonging on western US rangelands logically lead to their biopolitical treatment as expendable; if not, thanks to legal restrictions, as killable, then as detainable.<sup>107</sup> Thoughts and talk of killing, though, are never entirely absent from these fundamentally ex-

105 Walker, “BLM Announces Plans”.

106 Naumann, “Born to Be Wild”.

107 Hunold and Britton, ““Wild and Free””.

terminative contexts, fuelling as they do the imagination of some rangeland scientists and BLM officials. However, the public lands management system's massification of wild horses as marauding ecosystem destroyers has to contend with alternative affective logics and rationales that, via emotionally engaged storytelling about the lives and deaths of beloved nonhuman others, cultivate more-than-human empathy and care in the face of persistent systems of oppression. Faced with logics and rationales of massification and feralization that undermine the legitimacy of the political figure of the wild horse *and* of the political figure of the wild horse advocate, citizen-observers of roundups and removals nevertheless persist in affirming relations of interspecies kinship between actual humans and horses.

Wild horse advocates are the first to concede the modesty of their accomplishments. Thus, we must ask ourselves whether and in what ways empathetic entanglement with the lived experience of wild horses might actually reshape the future of wild horses on US public lands. In the short to medium term, focusing on movement building is likely a more promising strategy than hoping for immediate policy change. Though affected publics often turn into advocates for nonviolent human-animal coexistence,<sup>108</sup> human-animal studies literature suggests that affective enchantment alone does not suffice to secure abundant futures for all species.<sup>109</sup> The present trajectory of public lands management, moreover, appears stacked against wild horse advocates. After all, rather than zeroing out marginally profitable public lands grazing leases, the BLM is zeroing out wild horse herds in numerous HMAs. Advocates might take a small measure of comfort from knowing that the cultural impact of rendering visible otherwise unseen violence routinely inflicted on wild horses does not depend entirely on its ability to change policy. Anti-horse discourse can disavow emotion in its understanding of the "overpopulation" problem, discount the violence of public lands ranching, and denigrate the affective relations of wild horse advocacy. What it cannot accomplish, however, is to squash the capacity of wild horses and

108 See Sinha et al., "Affective Ethnographies of Animals Lives".

109 See Lien, "What's Love Got to Do with It?"

their human advocates to mount more-than-human campaigns of political resistance. For the foreseeable future, wild horse advocates, in their curious emotionality that so confounds rangeland scientists, will continue to be repulsed by so-called “win-win” proposals such as shooting wild horses and feeding their bodies to endangered California condors.<sup>110</sup>

None of this is to say that advocates are not justified in being concerned about the legibility of emotionally engaged storytelling to mainstream conservation science and policy audiences, particularly in bureaucratic settings. However, we caution that trading affective attachment and entangled empathy for bureaucratic rationality may be a short-sighted strategy, particularly in terms of attracting more supporters to wild horse preservation. When advocates attempt to translate their compassion for nonhuman others into “forms socially acceptable in the context of rational bureaucracy”, they risk obfuscating the values underpinning their commitments.<sup>111</sup> As we have shown, massifying wild horses renders individual horses’ experiences invisible and the horses themselves ungrievable. Emotional detachment of this sort serves to further claims that wild horses are threats to ecology and conservation interests by framing wild horses as less valuable inhabitants than other animals on the rangelands, which in turn makes them removable. What is more, purposeful emotional detachment from the experiences of wild horses, for the sake of appearing unbiased in policy arenas, exemplifies the irony of conservation: namely, that massification engenders precisely the disposability of nonhuman animals that makes conservation efforts necessary in the first place.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, emotionally engaged storytelling about wild horses as individuals with subjective experiences worthy of empathy enriches not only conservation science and practice; it also exposes and re-politicizes the construction of nonhuman expendability and precarity by ostensibly rational, but routinely violent management practices.

110 Danvir, “Multiple-Use Management”.

111 Whitney, “Tangled Up in Knots”.

112 Fraser-Celin and Hovorka, “Compassionate Conservation”.

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