

THT Guest Opinion

National Newspaper Slaughters Facts

USA Today Faulted for Shameless Inaccuracies

In her op-ed on horse slaughter titled Homeless on the Range (Aug. 14th 2007 USA Today), Mary Zeiss Stange demonstrates a remarkable journalistic ability to ferret out the truth and then painstakingly avoid it. As I read Dr. Stange's article with growing incredulity, I was reminded of the astute observations of the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts" and "There are some mistakes only someone with a PhD can make."

Dr. Stange's research on the subject of horse slaughter appears to have been limited to watching old Kirk Douglas movies, reading Oren Dorell's earlier USA Today article US shelters saddled with unwanted horses (March 2008), and googling a few pages on the internet. Stange's disdain for the tedium of fact checking was clearly demonstrated by her inclusion of a quote from Dorell's article attributed to Julie Caramante. Dorell had already apologized for committing the huge journalistic no-no of incorrectly attributing the statement to Caramante with whom he had never spoken.

Dr. Stange opens with a subtitle claiming that horses are being abandoned in the thousands. But instead of offering some evidence in support of this statement (and there is none), she goes on to claim, "The single overriding cause of surplus horses is the movement to ban the sale of horses or their meat for human consumption."

While Stange later mentions that more horses are being sent over the borders to slaughter in Mexico and Canada, she skillfully avoids the embarrassing fact that these increased exports have resulted in more American horses being slaughtered this year than before the plants were closed. According to the USDA, through June of this year we sent 65,899 horses to slaughter as opposed to only 63,650 for the same period of 2006 (the year before the closures). This unfortunate statistic entirely belies the Stange claim of causation for all the supposedly abandoned horses. There is no documented evidence that horse abandonment is epidemic or even significant, and there is presently no lack of a "slaughter option" for owners who wish to betray their equines with a tortuous trip to brutal slaughter.

Unsubstantiated statements run through Stange's article like the abandoned horses galloping through her furtive imagination. Even when she sites valid data, Stange manages to misquote it. For example, she claims "There are, to begin with, too many horses in the USA: 9.2 million as recently as 2005, up from 5.3 million in 1999".

These numbers imply that the horse population nearly doubled in just 6 years, but while the 9.2 million figure is correct for 2005, the 5.3 million figure (actually 5.25) was from an American Horse Council study done in 1986, not 1999. The actual period of this increase was 19 years, not 6, but this is hardly the kind of explosive growth that makes sensational scare journalism.

Even when Stange uses real data to make her points, she carefully cherry picks it to support horse slaughter. For example, she points out that the AHC study found a third of all horse owners had an annual income of \$50,000 or less, inferring that many horse owners cannot afford to take care of their horses. But this figure includes people in many situations that allow them to take

very good care of a horse for very little money including people who live in rural settings and own land with good grazing.

Stange carefully avoids a more telling economic statistic from the same study. The study estimated that the American horse industry earns about \$141 billion dollars a year either directly or indirectly. When one considers that horse slaughter industry is estimated to pay horse owners only about \$40 million dollars a year, we are left with the fact that horse slaughter represents only about 0.03% or one third of one tenth of one percent of the income horses generate.

Unwanted horses A postscript to the article claims that in 2007 the Unwanted Horse Coalition estimated that 170,000 abandoned horses lived in the United States. Contacted about this estimate, the UHC said they had no knowledge of where this quotation came from and that they had no such data. This misquote is followed by several press reports as proof of this epidemic of abandonment and neglect which according to Stange was the result of the closing of the US based slaughterhouses. It took little investigation to prove that these examples were as flawed as everything else in the Stange article. One example references the case of Francine Derby who had 120 starving equines seized from her Central Florida ranch in May. The Derby story was about a long term case of hoarding and had nothing to do with the current situation or the closing of the slaughter houses. Morgan Silver, executive director of the Horse Protection Association of Florida, stated that she filed a police report on the deplorable situation with Derby's horses back in 2003, four years before the first plant closings. At that time, Derby already had over 100 equines, mostly ponies and minis. And as to the pretense that Derby was a "rescuer", she had 45 stallions and was breeding the animals according to Silver. Another example given to prove the dire consequences of having closed the US plants states, "It is estimated that 200 of 1,200 wild horses overpopulating the Virginia Range near Reno, are actually "strays." Many won't survive in the wild, and the mustangs could be at risk of disease from domestic horses." Attempting to add her own spin to the story, Stange breaks new ground by streamlining the ancient and laborious process called Chinese Whisper Syndrome in which a story is repeated countless times until it bears no resemblance to the original. Stange uses her rigorous abstinence from fact checking to accomplish the same result in a single repetition. The quote Stange sites is from the Las Vegas Review Journal, but it is not "200 of the horses in the Virginia Range". The quote, attributed to Nevada's Agriculture Director Tony Lesperance, read, "although people refer to the 200 horses in the Virginia Range as wild horses, they technically are strays -- horses that may have been set free by their owners." The Nevada Department of Agriculture has long contended that all 1200 (not 200) Virginia Range horses are "strays" and that is undoubtedly what Lesperance said or meant to say. This does not mean any of them were recently abandoned. They have been there for a very long time. The NVDA calls the horses "strays" because they do not belong to the original Spanish horse bloodlines (Ironically, the Spanish horses were also "strays", but that is another story). The importance of this distinction is that the Virginia Range horses are not protected under law as "mustangs", thus freeing the hands of the NVDA to dispose of the horses as they please. Craig Downer, a wild horse expert who monitors the Virginia Range horses, says that no recently abandoned or stray horses have been detected in the herds. He adds that far from starving from overpopulation, the Virginia Range horses are thriving. In a single

paragraph, Stange both proves Moynihan's observation about mistakes only a PhD can make and creates a new entry in the lexicon of journalism that I predict will forever be known as Stange Whisper Syndrome. So why do writers like Stange, Dorell and many others keep pumping out these fallacious attempts to defend horse slaughter? The horse slaughter proxy war One has only to read the animal agriculture trade journals and magazines to understand what is really going on. The assault on the anti-horse slaughter legislation is nothing more than a proxy war against animal welfare organizations and the so called "animal rights" movement. The motivation for this assault is the belief that such a law would be a victory for the welfare groups and a step onto a slippery slope that might lead to other animal protection legislation. As in all wars, the innocent (in this case the horses) are the victims. The paranoia runs far deeper than the horse issue. Cattlemen at a recent Texas A&M seminar were told that recent video documentation of the incredibly inhumane treatment of "downer" (non-ambulatory) cattle at a California slaughterhouse was just the first step toward stopping the slaughter of cows, pigs, sheep and goats. And why might Dr. Stange, the author of Woman Hunter, coauthor of Gun Women and author of the pending book Sister Predators be motivated to join a proxy war against animal welfare organizations? One can only ponder such mysteries, but we might have expected that with fifty years of experience as a Montana hunter and journalist, Stange would have thought to bring some ammunition to this war. Obviously, the writers of this propaganda cannot simply say, "we think you are after our cattle and pigs, so we are not going to let you protect the horses." Instead, they make up tales about a plague of abandoned and unwanted horses and pretend to care about the horses as they drive their fiction home in article after article. So why should the average American care about this dirty little proxy war? The answer is as simple as it is profound. If we cannot trust publications like the USA Today to tell us the truth on this subject, how can we trust them on any other? Dr. Stange chose to open her article with a scene from Lonely are the Brave in which the Kirk Douglas character pays dearly for the decision not to abandon his beloved mare Whiskey. Perhaps it would have worked better if she had chosen to paraphrase Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles; Facts? Facts? We don't need no stinking facts! John Holland is a freelance writer and the author of three books. He frequently writes on the subject of horse slaughter from his small farm in the mountains of Virginia, where he lives with his wife, Sheilah, and their 12 equines. Holland serves as senior analyst for Americans Against Horse Slaughter, an organization composed entirely of volunteers.

<http://www.texashorsetalk.com/breakingnews.htm>

The original story that John was responding to from USA Today August 19, 2008 page 13A

Homeless on the range

Horses are being abandoned by the thousands across the USA. Some are strays, others a result of overbreeding or a sour economy. How should we humanely lessen their numbers?

By Mary Zeiss Stange

It's a climactic scene in the 1962 Kirk Douglas film, *Lonely Are the Brave*. The cowboy, Jack Burns — fugitive both from the law and the civilization overtaking the open range — confronts a choice: He can scale a steep rock face and escape to Mexico. But to do so, he must leave his palomino mare, Whiskey, to either be recovered by the posse pursuing him, or to run wild in the New Mexico desert.

It takes him but a moment to decide: Whatever the outcome, he and his horse are in this together. It is a noble sentiment and an ultimately tragic decision. In the end, the horse is literally dead and her rider at least metaphorically so.

No one who owns and loves horses, as I do, can fail to note the counterpoint the film provides to what is happening to horses in America today. There is a national epidemic of "surplus" or "unwanted" horses. Domestic horses are being abandoned as never before. Some are being released as "strays" on public lands. Others are being left to starve in pastures denuded of grass. The reasons are various and excruciatingly complex.

There are, to begin with, too many horses in the USA: 9.2 million as recently as 2005, up from 5.3 million in 1999. Indiscriminate breeding leads not just to too many horses, but also to too many with physical or behavioral faults that render them unsuitable for domestic uses.

Then there's the economy. Horses are not cheap to keep. Factor in training, vet care, tack and feed, and the expense averages \$1,800 to \$2,400 per animal, per year — and rising, as grain and fuel costs increase. According to the American Horse Council, a third of horse owners have household incomes less than \$50,000 a year. When it comes to feeding your horses or putting gas in the car, the choice is simple, if painful.

But the single overriding cause of "surplus" horses is the movement to ban the sale of horses or their meat for human consumption. Activism forced the last three horse slaughter plants in the U.S. to close last year. They had hitherto processed about 100,000 horses annually, mostly for meat sales to France and Japan, where horse meat is considered a delicacy.

On its face, the closings would seem to be a victory for horse lovers. Former New York representative John Sweeney, who sponsored a bill in 2006 to curtail horse slaughter, told *Fox News* that slaughter is a "brutal, shady practice" because horses such as Mr. Ed, Secretariat and Silver are American icons.

Julie Caramante of Habitat for Horses, a rescue operation in Houston, told USA TODAY in March that horses are pets, and that "we wouldn't even dream of selling our pets" for food.

Supporters of the horse slaughter ban include the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, as well as such major animal rights groups as the Humane Society of the United States and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. But most major veterinary medical groups oppose it, as does the American Quarter Horse Association.

Why would advocates of horse health and welfare oppose a ban on the slaughter? Mostly because humane slaughter is preferable to neglect or abuse. But there is an additional irony:

Horses bound for auction, even if that means eventual slaughter, are better cared for than those that have little economic value. Auction prices have plummeted since the slaughter ban went into effect. And so, too often, has the level of care afforded many unwanted horses.

An increasing number of these horses are now bought to be shipped to slaughtering facilities in Canada or, more likely, Mexico. In the latter case, their treatment is liable to be nothing short of barbaric, compared with the methods employed by the now-shuttered U.S. slaughterhouses, which had conformed to the standards of the Humane Slaughter Act. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) reports that horse slaughter exports to Mexico have in a single year increased by 312%, to more than 44,000 horses in 2007.

In response, animal rights activists are pushing the extension of the ban to include the transport of horses to other countries for slaughter. Federal legislation to this effect — the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act of 2008 — was introduced in the House just ahead of Congress' summer recess. The AVMA calls the situation a horse welfare crisis. It attributes the cause primarily to the coalition of slaughter-ban activists spearheaded by the Humane Society, and its failure to suggest viable alternatives.

The way to the current crisis was, of course, paved with good intentions. But the options available, for dealing with 100,000 unwanted steeds, are unfortunately limited, and largely unfeasible:

- Euthanasia is a possibility. But it is costly, \$100 to \$600 per horse. The cost of burial or cremation could add several hundred dollars.
- Rescue facilities are an option; many already exist. But their capacity is about 6,000 horses, and we are looking at a surplus of roughly 100,000 horses every year. At \$1,800 to \$2,400 to keep each animal, that comes to \$180 million to \$240 million annually. Because many of these horses will live several years until their natural deaths, the cost could balloon exponentially. Who will bear it?
- A limited number of suitable horses can be donated to schools and therapeutic facilities, and for veterinary research.

In the longer range, the breeding of horses must be sharply curtailed. In the meantime, the resumption of humane slaughter in this country should be seriously considered.

The Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act, should it eventually become law, does not mandate funding for the support of surplus horses. And opponents have failed to raise the funding for rescue facilities, adoption programs and so forth.

Meanwhile, ever-increasing numbers of unwanted horses are languishing in grassless pastures, dazedly roaming desiccated public lands, and living with disease and chronic pain. Whatever you might think about the relative merits of horse meat, this is a hell of a way to treat an "American icon." The cowboy Jack Burns wouldn't have stood for it.

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