"The Burro Evil": The Removal of Feral Burros from Grand Canyon National Park, 1924–1983

By Abbie Harlow

The plan was simple: arm the park rangers, send them deep into the canyon, shoot the animals, and leave the bodies. The goal was for them to kill all of the estimated three hundred burros within the park boundaries in less than a month. If all went according to plan, every feral burro in Grand Canyon National Park would be dead by the summer of 1980. The National Park Service (NPS) expected the extermination to run smoothly. During the previous half century, rangers and hired hunters had shot, poisoned, rounded-up, and driven off cliffs more than two thousand burros in accordance with park-service policy. The animals had been left where they fell or sold for dog food.[1] What the NPS did not account for, however, was how shifting public attitudes about the environment would result in virulent opposition to this plan in the 1960s and 1970s. News of the NPS's plan to gun down burros spread across the nation. The proposed slaughter frightened wild horse and burro supporters who had successfully pushed for the passage of laws to protect equines on public land. The "mass slaying" of these animals, one letter to the editor proclaimed, would betray everyone who fought to protect wild horses and burros. Nonetheless, in 1980, the NPS announced that rangers would kill every burro in Grand Canyon National Park by the end of the year.[2]

[1] Frank Brookshier, *The Burro* (Norman, Okla., 1974), 264.
[2] National Park Service, *Feral Burro Management and Ecosystem Restoration Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 8.

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Park-service administrators first initiated annual burro culls in 1924. The NPS argued that burros eroded canyon trails and cliffs, fouled water sources, and overgrazed the limited forage. Although rangers shot feral burros on sight—with little public awareness or concern—they were never able to eradicate the population. However, with a growing interest in environmental policy and animal advocacy in the 1960s and 1970s, the NPS's removal attempts created controversy and outraged the public. At the time, people voiced their opinions about NPS policy through letter-writing campaigns and letters to the editor.[3] Ironically, the controversy surrounding burro removal pitted environmental organizations against one another as some groups supported removal because they were concerned about the ecological impact of burros while animal-advocacy associations focused upon the treatment of the animals and their role in human history. Despite these conflicting goals, both types of groups found ways to influence park-service policy with respect to exotic species in parks and monuments.

In considering the conflicting positions of these environmental groups, this article explores the intersection of human and animal history on public land policy. Following the rise of modern environmentalism during the 1960s and 1970s, public influence on national park policy rose as numerous organizations affected federal legislation and rallied the public.[4] Similarly, animal-advocacy organizations used media attention to influence policy. In focusing on burros in Grand Canyon, this article considers the role of animals in historical events through the effect public influence had on the NPS policy of burro removal.[5] Because burros are a non-native, charismatic megafauna, environmental agencies and animal organizations split over the issue of removal. Solving this

[3] Burro Scrapbook Materials, 102124, Grand Canyon National Park Research Library, Grand Canyon, Ariz. (hereinafter GCNPRL).

[4] Jerry J. Frank, *Making Rocky Mountain National Park: The Environmental History of an American Treasure* (Lawrence, Kans., 2013); Hal Rothman, *America's National Monuments: The Politics of Preservation* (Lawrence, Kans., 1989); Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln, Neb., 1987); Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, Conn., 1997).

[5] Susan Nance, ed., *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2015); Brett L. Walker, "Animals and the Intimacy of History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford, U.K., 2014), 52–75; Zeb Tortorici and Martha Few, "Writing Animal Histories," in *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, ed. Zeb Tortorici and Martha Few (Durham, N.C., 2013), 1–30.

difficult dilemma forced policymakers to consider complex questions about the role of animals in human history and culture when framing regulations designed to protect the environment within Grand Canyon National Park.

Adapted to Canyon Life

Burros evolved across the grasslands of North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Africa.[6] Compared to its equid relative, the horse, burros are shorter in stature with an average height of ten hands or forty inches from the ground to withers.[7] Their ears are much longer than those of any other equid. While smaller than horses and weaker than oxen, humans have utilized burros as strong draft animals that require relatively little feed, making them cheap and capable labor. The burro is well adapted to harsh, dry settings; they subsist on little water and eat most plants that grow in the desert.[8] Burros are uniquely suited to difficult cliff trails as they move slowly to prevent falls or missteps and their legs, which are shorter than those of a horse, are stronger and less likely to twist and break. Their hooves are small and able to fit around areas of loose rock.[9] Their small stature, large head, and long ears make them endearing creatures, and their calm demeanor further appeals to humans. When not frightened or excited, burros tend to expend little energy, standing in place with a bowed head and drooping eyes.[10]

Burros' North American equid relatives died off at the close of the Pleistocene era, around ten thousand years ago, due to rising temperatures and human over-hunting.[11] However, wild burros in North Africa survived and humans domesticated the animals for meat and labor. By the age of exploration in the fifteenth century, burros had made their name as valuable work animals, leading Iberian explorers to carry donkeys, along with other livestock,

[6] Juliet Clutton-Brock, *Horse Power: A History of the Horse and the Donkey in Human Societies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 17–18.
[7] Brookshier, *Burro*, 14.
[8] Brookshier, *Burro*, 21–22; Craig C. Downer, "The Horse and Burro as Positively Contributing Returned Natives in North America," *American Journal of Life Sciences* 2 (2014): 11.
[9] Brookshier, *Burro*, 11.
[10] Brookshier, *Burro*, 9–11; Clutton-Brock, *Horse Power*, 18.
[11] Gary Haynes, "The Catastrophic Extinction of North American Mammoths and Mastodonts," *World Archaeology* 33 (2002): 407; Clutton-Brock, *Horse Power*, 25.

to North America. Following their introduction, burros spread across the continent accompanying Spanish conquistadors in the late sixteenth century.[12] Although the burro population in the present-day American Southwest grew each year, the number of feral burros remained low until the twentieth century as they were too valuable to purposefully release.[13] As a Spanish burro population grew in Grand Canyon, American-bred donkeys accompanied settlers westward from the east coast. This westward movement of burros was often in the company of hopeful miners who entered the canyon in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.[14]

Non-native species, including burros, are a contentious subject in North American history. Some exotic animal species adapted to the environment quickly, leading to overpopulation and increased competition for native species. Many of these non-native species thrived in new regions, while the animals also caused environmental damage. Cattle, pigs, sheep, and horses overgrazed fields, pushed out native game, and destroyed agriculture. Historians have documented the expansion, adaption, and damage caused by non-native species in North America.[15] The burro in Grand Canyon offers a comparable case study of a non-native species introduced into a new environment in which they acclimated and impacted surrounding native plants and animals. In addition to their environmental impacts, burros are noteworthy because of the ways their presence reshaped park policy.

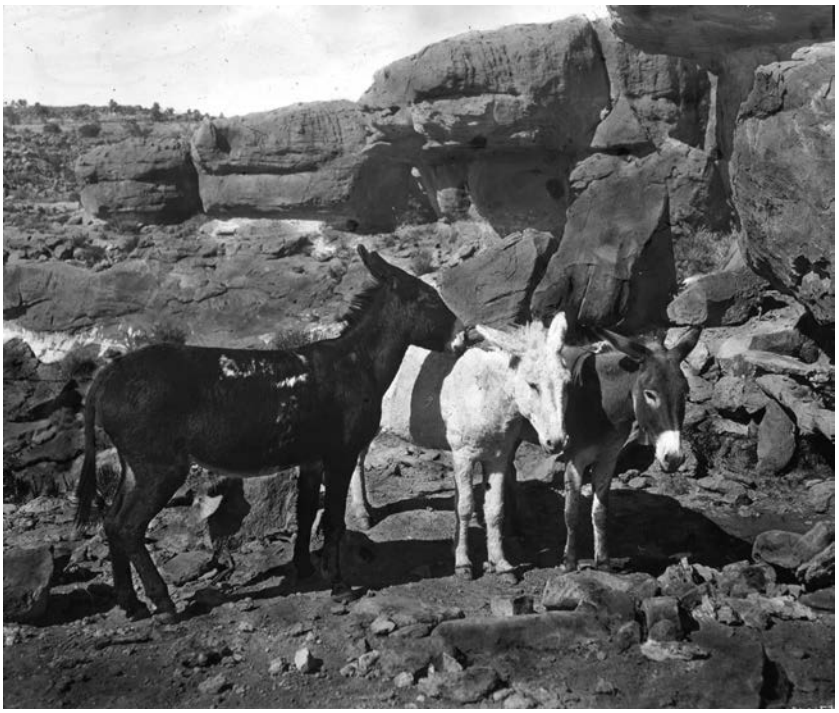
Although not native to the region, burros survived in the canyon and their population grew. As early as 1860, prospectors entered the canyon in search of gold, silver, and asbestos. Burros were the most common companion for prospectors because they could carry supplies and needed only water or food found in the canyon. For decades, burros carried riders, hauled packs, pulled carts, and served as companion animals throughout Grand

[12] Brookshier, *Burro,* 57, 219–20, 239.

[13] Clutton-Brock, *Horse Power*, 40.

[14] Brookshier, *Burro*, 12; Anthony Dent, *Donkey: The Story of the Ass from East to West* (London, 1972), 113.

[15] Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986); Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford, U.K., 2004); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983); Elinor Melville, *Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994); Brett Mizelle, *Pig* (London, 2012).



Many Anglo prospectors brought burros to Grand Canyon in the late nineteenth century. When the prospectors struck out and left the region, they often left their animal companions behind, leading to a population of feral burros in the area. Photograph by F. H. Maude, Bass Family Photographs, PC 181, Box 6, #58, Arizona Historical Society–Tucson Collections.

Canyon's steep trails and cliff walls.[16] Even with a loyal burro and some luck, Grand Canyon prospectors often left empty-handed. Over time, miners lost faith in the rough terrain and left the canyon, leaving behind their burro companions who were much better suited to the area than the miners. A feral population of burros formed on the canyon rim and at the base along the river, a population that grew yearly as more burros escaped or as disheartened prospectors set others free.[17]

[16] George H. Billingsley, Earle E. Spamer, and Dove Menkes, *Quest for the Pillar of Gold: The Mines and Miners of the Grand Canyon* (Grand Canyon, Ariz., 1997), 21.

[17] George H. Billingsley, "Prospector's Proving Ground: Mining in the Grand Canyon," *Journal of Arizona History* 17 (Spring 1976): 87.

By the turn of the twentieth century, as mining operations slowed and a tourist economy took root, burros sometimes carried visitors on trail rides. Burro trail rides became an important aspect of the Grand Canyon experience because, for many tourists, riding a burro was the easiest way to descend the canyon.[18] "By mounting a burro," one newspaper reporter announced in 1911, "the tourist can find himself in two hours in a scene of utter desolation which has never been penetrated by the automobile."[19] Burros offered an accessibility to the vast caverns and steep, treacherous paths that were otherwise unreachable. Brighty, the most famous burro of Grand Canyon, cemented the burro as a symbol of Grand Canyon tourism. Brighty lived in the canyon from 1892 to 1922, a friendly, feral burro that wandered between animal wilderness and human settlements. When with humans, the burro allowed children to climb on his back or he would carry water across short distances.[20] In any incarnation, as a prospector's companion, a trail guide, a memory of Brighty, or a feral animal on canyon cliffs, burros were embedded in the cultural landscape of Grand Canyon.[21]

The Authentic Arizona Burro

In 1916, Congress passed the National Park Service Organic Act, establishing the NPS within the Department of the Interior and setting forth a plan for the use of park land.[22] One year later, Stephen Mather began work as the first director of the NPS.[23] Mather immediately worked to create the park service he imagined—teeming with visitors, picturesque nature scenes, and desired animals always within view. Tourism was the most important goal of Mather's NPS, and it promoted developments such

[18] John Wills, "'On Burro'd Time': Feral Burros, the Brighty Legend, and the Pursuit of Wilderness in the Grand Canyon," *Journal of Arizona History* 44 (Spring 2003): 1; J. Donald Hughes, *In the House of Stone and Light: A Human History of the Grand Canyon* (Grand Canyon, Ariz., 1978), 47.

[19] "Vest Pocket Essays," *Patriot* (Harrisburg, Penn.), September 20, 1911.

[20] A. E. Demaray, "The Passing of Brighty," *Outing: Sport, Adventure, Travel, Fiction*, February 1923, p. 225.

[21] "Grand Canyon Will Appear at Exposition," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, December 28, 1912.

[22] National Park Service (to accompany H.R. 15522), May 17, 1916, 64th Cong., 1st sess., p. 700.

[23] Russ Olsen, *Administrative History: Organizational Structures of the National Park Service, 1917 to 1985* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 7.

as hotels, roads, fences, and railroads.[24] As the NPS grew as an agency, Grand Canyon promoters developed a tourist industry. Private businesses established hotels, rail lines, trails, and numerous other tourist amenities around the canyon.

The presence of more tourists led to demands for additional animals to carry people into the canyon. Burros were still common pack animals until the 1910s when mules surpassed them. The offspring of a male burro and a female horse, mules' lineage makes them taller and stronger than burros, enabling them to carry more weight. The animals are also sturdier and less skittish than horses, making them safer for trail rides. Mules, however, are unable to breed. The sterile animals were an impractical investment for a tour company isolated in the canyon. With increased infrastructure at the canyon, tour guides and companies could ship in mules and house the animals in the newly developed pastures and barns. The infrastructure also allowed mule owners to feed the larger animals that could not subsist on desert brush. While mules surpassed burros as trail animals, burros were still necessary to navigate incomplete or hazardous trails because they could walk on loose rocks and fit on smaller paths.[25]

Although domestic burros served the tourist industry, the NPS began planning the eradication of feral burros under Director Mather. In his 1920 report, Mather offered a negative view of the animal, blaming burros for eating too much forage and for destroying tourist trails. He stated, "The time is not far distant when radical steps will have to be taken to eliminate the burro evil."[26] In 1924, the NPS established annual burro hunts, authorizing rangers to shoot burros on sight. In his 1930 report, Horace Albright, Mather's successor, stated that annual burro-hunting parties had killed 1,337 burros in six years.[27] These culls inspired little interest from the public, and the NPS conducted them away from

[24] Richard West Sellars, "Manipulating Nature's Paradise: National Park Management under Stephen T. Mather, 1916–1929," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 43 (Spring 1993): 5.

[25] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 5.

[26] Stephen Mather, *Report of Director of National Park Service* (Washington, D.C., 1920), 66. Mather uses the phrase "the burro evil" in this report when discussing his concerns of the burro population.

[27] Horace M. Albright, *Report of Director of National Park Service* (Washington, D.C., 1930), 103; Brookshier, *Burro*, 264.

tourists' eyes.[28] Routine burro culls continued in the mid-twentieth century, even as children's author Marguerite Henry brought public interest back to Brighty and Grand Canyon burros. After extensive research at the canyon, interviews with area residents, and the purchase of her own burro, Henry published her children's book, *Brighty of the Grand Canyon*, in 1953.[29] While grounded in the true tale of Brighty's life in Grand Canyon, Henry created an imaginative story of a wild but friendly burro who belonged in Grand Canyon as much as the "dust and the ageless limestone that rose in great towering battlements behind him."[30] Henry's book raised public interest in Brighty as a native, wild Grand Canyon burro that directly contradicted the NPS's image of destructive exotics.[31]

Brighty presented an endearing image of burros to the public as a charismatic megafauna species. Henry's work amplified burros' charismatic nature and gained public interest in the already popular animals. This is clear in the language of burro supporters, labelling the animals as "intelligent" and "benevolent."[32] Charismatic animals and their representations, such as Brighty, drive people to action and can affect policy decisions regarding animals that receive public attention as opposed to those that are ignored.

In the 1960s and 1970s, public interest in NPS policy rose as the modern environmental movement emerged. Attention to Grand Canyon burros increased because of the popularity of the endearing tale of Brighty. At the same time, NPS ecologists conducted several studies to prove to the public that burros were damaging the canyon and should not remain in the park. NPS ecologists studied the effects of previous park policies. In Grand Canyon, as in other places, the polices following these studies often produced public resistance to the plans of park officials such as the public outrage that halted routine elk culls in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) in 1960. RMNP

[28] R. Gerald Wright, "A Review of the Relationships between Visitors and Ungulates in National Parks," *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 26 (Autumn 1998): 472.

[29] Thomas Heron McKee, "Brighty, Free Citizen: How the Sagacious Hermit Donkey of the Grand Cañon Maintained His Liberty for Thirty Years," *Sunset*, December 1992; Don Lago, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife of Brighty," *The Ol' Pioneer: The Magazine of the Grand Canyon Historical Society* 23 (2012): 10.

[30] Marguerite Henry, *Brighty of the Grand Canyon* (New York, 1953), 13, 222.

[31] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 7.

[32] Cleveland Amory, *Ranch of Dreams: The Heartwarming Story of America's Most Unusual Animal Sanctuary* (New York, 1997), 79.

The National Park Service began planning for burro eradication in Grand Canyon National Park as a early as the 1920s. The public did not object to such plans until later in the century. Photograph by F. H. Maude, Bass Family Photographs, PC 181, Box 9, #207, Arizona Historical Society–Tucson Collections.

rangers had culled the elk population annually from 1944 to 1959. However, increased pressure from newspaper articles, letters, and displeased visitors convinced the park's administration to live-capture excess animals. Other parks faced public outcry against park

policy following the rise of the environmental movement, including backlash against cattle grazing on park land and increased tourist attention to predator-control efforts in Yellowstone.[33]

The NPS burro-removal program faced limited public scrutiny from 1920 until increased public attention during the environmental movement of the 1960s and the animal-advocacy movement of the 1970s. The focus of Grand Canyon burro removal demonstrates a specific concern that drove public involvement and illustrates the various ways people and organizations could voice their opinions. In the fight over burro removal, public action influenced by the environmental and animal-advocacy movements clashed. While established environmental organizations such as the Audubon Society and Sierra Club supported burro removal, the newer animal-advocacy groups such as the American Humane Association and Wild Horse Preservation Campaign argued that removal through culling was an inhumane option. The reasons for the clash between these two factions is visible in their rhetoric. Environmental groups emphasized the ecological effects of policy decisions while animal-advocacy associations considered the treatment of animals.

As the environmental and animal-advocacy groups gained attention between 1951 and 1972, the NPS hired environmental scientists to research the effects of past and current animal-management practices across all of its parks. The increased number of scientific studies reflected a professionalization of NPS employees and the park service itself, emphasizing ecology over recreation.[34] Several ecological studies focused on burros in Grand Canyon in the 1960s. The studies cited burros as responsible for causing topsoil erosion on canyon plateaus, rockslides and cliff side erosion, fouling water sources, wallowing in water seeps, and, above all else, creating direct grazing competition for bighorn sheep, an indigenous species.[35] Rangers continued burro culls and between

[33] Alice Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears: The Fitful History of Wildlife and Tourists in Yellowstone* (Lawrence, Kans., 2006); Frank, *Making Rocky Mountain National Park*; Jim Robbins, *Last Refuge: The Environmental Showdown in Yellowstone and the American West* (New York, 1993).

[34] Henry, *Brighty of the Grand Canyon*, 222; Olsen, *Administrative History,* 75, 85, 95; Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 204; Robert B. Keiter, *To Conserve Unimpaired: The Evolution of the National Park Idea* (Washington, D.C., 2013), 3.

[35] Steven W. Carothers, M. E. Stitt, and R. R. Johnson, "Feral Asses on Public Lands: An Analysis of Biotic Impact, Legal Considerations and Management Alternatives," *Transac-*

1924 and 1968, they culled 2,608 burros, a large number but never enough to eradicate the animals completely. The shootings continued throughout the 1960s in much the same way they had begun four decades earlier.[36]

Once news of the NPS's actions to remove burros from Grand Canyon spread across the nation, protests ignited. Lobbying for the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act began in the 1950s. Passed in 1971, the act protected free-roaming burros and horses on public land from "capture, branding, harassment, or death."[37] The act, however, did not apply to national park land. Nevertheless, many of the organizations that promoted the act worked against the burro-removal plan.[38] Private citizens reacted to the removal plan by inundating the canyon offices with as many as twelve thousand letters in the 1970s asking the NPS to reconsider removing the burros.[39] One letter mailed to Park Ranger Jim Walters asked, "How would *you* like to be *shot*?" Across the country, newspapers printed articles about the removal plan and editorial pages were filled with calls to "save the burros." A letter to the editor of the *New York Times* threatened, "The canyon may soon become a slaughterhouse." While most protesters asked that the burros remain untouched in the canyon, in some letters, people offered other solutions to the problem such as "importing mountain lions to eat them [or] growing grass in the canyon to feed them." Protests against the burro-removal plan kept the public engaged in the fate of the Grand Canyon burros into the early 1980s.[40]

Those in favor of burro removal presented their findings as objective science and labelled the public protests as sentimental.

tions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference 41 (1976): 397, 403–5; Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 259; Scott R. Abella, "A Systematic Review of Wild Burro Grazing Effects on Mojave Desert Vegetation, USA," *Environmental Management* 41 (June 2008): 813; Rick F. Seegmiller and Robert D. Ohmart, "Ecological Relationships of Feral Burros and Desert Bighorn Sheep," *Wildlife Monographs* 78 (July 1981): 30.

[36] Tom L. McKnight, "The Feral Burro in the United States: Distribution and Problems," *Journal of Wildlife Management* 22 (April 1958): 171; Correspondence on Wildlife Projects (1960–1963), 56966, GCNPRL; Robert H. Webb, *Grand Canyon, a Century of Change: Rephotography of the 1889–1890 Stanton Expedition* (Tucson, 1996), 72.

[37] Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, Public Law 92–195, available on the Bureau of Land Management website, https://www.blm.gov/or/regulations/files/whbact_1971.pdf.

[38] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 10.

[39] Margot Hornblower, "Burro Battle: Like Comedy of the Absurd," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1979.

[40] Burro Scrapbook Materials, *Daily Californian* (1979), 102124, GCNPRL; Burro Scrapbook Materials, *New York Times* (1978), 102124, GCNPRL; Hornblower, "Burro Battle."

Park officials feared that emotional laymen would undermine their expertise. Many people understood the basic damage done by burros, such as eroding trails and overeating limited forage, but the NPS released information about burro damage in complicated scientific studies.[41] To many, plans to eradicate the canyon burros sounded cold, economic, or, even, bloodthirsty. Scientists conducting studies of burro damage further alienated the many burro supporters by criticizing the latter's stance as uneducated and hysterical. In one study, ecologist Steven Carothers and Grand Canyon park superintendent Merle Stitt derogatorily labelled those who disagreed with burro removal as "assinophiles" and called their disagreements "public hysteria." Dismissive and emotionally charged language filtered into many writings that supported burro removal. Studies often referred to burros as "pests" and "vermin."[42] Most people and organizations who supported burro removal publicly dismissed those that disagreed. This dismissal and alienation only furthered the fervor of burro supporters. While the NPS released scientific studies, media outlets exacerbated the public's outrage about the burro-removal plan. Newspapers across the country covered the NPS's decision to shoot the canyon burros with dramatic headlines and images of burro foals. Many articles included a brief statement about the ecological damage burros inflicted on the canyon but mainly emphasized the plan to shoot the animals.[43] While the Grand Canyon burro removal plan changed minimally from 1924 to 1969, public support to save canyon burros grew exponentially. The ensuing public outcry in support of burros created a negative image of the NPS and a much longer removal process than anticipated.[44]

Grand Canyon administrators ceased the original burro-control program in 1969 due to growing public pressure against burro culling. In order to inform the public, Superintendent Stitt and other NPS officials released public statements in the mid-1970s, and, in 1979, held several meetings to inform the public and allow people to voice their concerns about the burro-removal plan.[45] The

[41] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 14; John Wills, "Brighty, Donkeys and Conservation in the Grand Canyon," *Endeavor* 30 (Sept. 2006): 116.

[42] Carothers, Stitt, and Johnson, "Feral Asses on Public Lands," 397.

[43] Burro Scrapbook Materials (1976–1981), 102124, GCNPRL; W. E. Garrett, "The Grand Canyon: Are we loving it to death?" *National Geographic*, July 1978, pp. 30–31.

[44] Wills, "Brighty," 116; Stephen Mather, *Report of Director of National Park Service*, 6.

[45] Transcript of Public Meeting, Flagstaff, Arizona (1979), p. 8, 52802, GCNPRL; Correspondence on Wildlife Projects (1960–1963), 56966, GCNPRL.

majority of people who spoke at these meetings were representatives of the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and other conservation groups already aware of the burro situation in the canyon. Often, instead of informing the public, these meetings contained groups that were already educated in the burro-control effort. The NPS's attempt to educate the public about burros in Grand Canyon National Park became an echo chamber of wildlife organizations while the public remained upset about the situation and uninformed about the burro-control plan. With the NPS's limited reach and faulty attempts to educate, the public rallied against the burro-removal plan.[46]

The NPS administration stood steadfast in its plan to remove the exotic animal and no lawsuit, claim of "burro-cide," or hand-drawn picture of Brighty would change that decision. In Grand Canyon, burros were an exotic species and slated for removal by the park service. Increased public pressure to save the canyon burros without enough public education concerning the ecological damage caused by burros, led to an outraged public, a negative image of the National Park Service, and a complicated and long removal process. By the mid-1970s, the NPS was nearly ready to release its Burro Management Plan and Environmental Assessment and finally eradicate all burros from Grand Canyon.[47]

A Canyon Without Burros

After the NPS halted burro removal, the agency attempted to explain the burro issue by releasing public statements and authorizing scientific studies. These actions did little to quell the growing concern over the possible burro slaughter. To explain the negative effects of burros in the canyon, the NPS released the Burro Management Plan and Environmental Assessment in November 1976. The plan included several studies of burro impacts on canyon soils, vegetation, and wildlife, concluding that Grand Canyon policy would require rangers to shoot all the burros in the park. After six years of no reduction measures, the NPS estimated that

[46] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 13; Wills, "Brighty," 116.

[47] National Park Service Grand Canyon National Park, *Feral Burro Management Plan and Environmental Assessment* (Washington, D.C., 1976).

the burro population had soared to two or three thousand.[48] The conclusion outraged burro supporters who claimed the assessment lacked proof. Further, the plan stated that direct reduction through shooting was the only viable means of eradicating the animals from the park. While many wished to keep the burros in the canyon, killing the animals upset far more people than the idea of removal.[49] In response to the environmental assessment, the American Horse Protection Association (AHPA) sued the NPS, preventing the agency from conducting any removal efforts until it conducted a full environmental impact statement (EIS).[50] The increased pressure of the AHPA lawsuit forced the NPS to create an extensive EIS between 1976 and 1980.[51]

The NPS combined several studies about burro grazing habits, competition with desert bighorn sheep, trailing and erosion, and reproductive rates into a draft EIS. The draft cited the exotic status of burros in North America as the main cause for the removal but also included findings from the studies conducted in the 1970s. The draft concluded, "Feral burros change the natural condition of park soils through compaction and soil erosion."[52] The draft EIS acknowledged, however, that some ecologists disagreed with these findings. While not certain, the draft EIS offered enough correlation between burros and canyon damage to convince the NPS of the animals' negative effects. "Although most managers and scientists feel burros have a definite impact on native plant and animal communities," the draft states, "there are a few scientists who feel this impact is slight or insignificant."[53] The inconclusive findings and use of vague terms led many commenters to question the scientific reasons for burro removal. The draft EIS did not convince everyone that burro removal by shooting was the best or only option, and the debate over eradication raged on.[54]

[48] Ibid., IX-59.
[49] Wills, "On Burro'd Time,"10.
[50] National Park Service Grand Canyon National Park, *Feral Burro Management and Ecosystem Restoration Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (Washington, D.C., 1980), ix–60.
[51] The EIS process included the creation of a draft that the National Park Service made available for comments by agencies, organizations, and private citizens. The draft EIS sparked further public debate regarding burro removal.
[52] National Park Service, *Feral Burro Management,* 45–49.
[53] Ibid., 45–49.
[54] Ibid., IX-76, IX-37-81.

The draft EIS included the proposed plan to complete the eradication of the burros. Rangers at close range would shoot the animals during an initial twenty-day reduction period. Helicopters would fly rangers to the general vicinity of the herds, but the hunters would proceed on foot. Rangers would leave all the burros they killed within the canyon to decompose. If, however, hikers could view the carcasses from trails or the bodies were close enough to foul water sources, rangers would move them to a more remote location. The NPS then planned to build a two-and-a-half-mile fence between the park and Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LMNRA) to keep burros out of the park.[55]

The NPS mailed out the draft EIS for comments from organizations and individuals ranging from the Bureau of Land Management to the American Horse Protection Association.[56] Based on comments received in the spring of 1979, the opinions of the public and the scientific community remained divided. Perhaps the most important comment on the draft came from the animal-advocacy organization the Fund for Animals. With no chance of keeping feral burros in Grand Canyon, the Fund for Animals offered to remove the animals alive.[57] The final environmental impact statement, released in January 1980, included a provision proposed by the Fund for Animals to allow individuals and organizations to remove as many burros as they could before culling began.[58] Grand Canyon staff would supervise the live removal attempts, but the removal and the cost would be the responsibility of those participating in the process. The plan to allow individuals to take feral burros from the canyon, the NPS stated, "is not considered to have any resource management benefits beyond public relations."[59] Despite delaying burro removal even more, the NPS agreed to the provision of live removal in an attempt to salvage the agency's image.[60]

When the Fund for Animals offered to remove an estimated 350 feral burros from Grand Canyon, the organization had little experience and almost no money. Cleveland Amory had founded the Fund for Animals thirteen years prior in 1967 with the plan to

[55] Ibid., 8.
[56] Ibid., IX-36, IX-82.
[57] Wild Burros/Burro Fence Information (1980–1992), 97879, GCNPRL.
[58] National Park Service, *Feral Burro Management*, 1–5; Molly Ivins, "Wild Burros Plucked out of Grand Canyon," *New York Times*, July 30, 1980; Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 18.
[59] National Park Service, *Feral Burro Management*, 5–6, 16.
[60] Wills, "Brighty," 116; Burro Scrapbook Materials (1976–1981), 102124, GCNPRL.

draw attention to other organizations' projects.[61] Over the next decade and a half, the Fund for Animals received increased attention and money as Amory engaged in several highly publicized animal debates and protection attempts including testifying in Congress for the passage of the Airborne Hunting Act, which prohibited shooting wildlife from helicopters.[62]

Amory immediately began a fundraising campaign to pay for the extensive removal project. Donations followed a shocking full-page ad in the magazine *Parade,* which ran several times between May 1980 and January 1981. It featured an image of Cleveland Amory holding a burro foal with the words, "If you turn the page, this burro will be killed." The ad asked the reader to help pay for, what it called, "probably the toughest animal rescue operation in history."[63] While Amory raised money for the burro removal, NPS officials and members of the Sierra Club and National Audubon Society questioned the Fund for Animals' ability to remove the animals, and Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt believed the idea of live removal was absurd.[64] Most deemed the project impossible because of its scope. Moreover, they criticized the effort as a lot of work and money for a few lowly donkeys. Amory responded, "the burro was the beast of burden for the whole world if we could make a highly publicized statement for that animal . . . then it would be well worth it."[65] Many financial donors agreed with Amory, donating enough money to support the entire removal.[66]

The removal of the burros from the million-acre park presented logistical challenges, but the Fund for Animals benefited from the NPS's example of failed removal attempts in the past. Tranquilizing the burros rarely worked; either the immobilizing darts were too strong for the burro's weight and the animal overdosed or burros hit by darts ran up cliffs and fell to their death. Rangers had tried to herd burros from the canyon, but the narrow

[61] Marilyn Greenwald, *Cleveland Amory: Media Curmudgeon & Animal Rights Crusader* (Hanover, N.H., 2009), 118.

[62] Greenwald, *Cleveland Amory,* 122; Julie Hoffman Marshall, *Making Burros Fly: Cleveland Amory, Animal Rescue Pioneer* (Denver, 2006), 24; Amory, *Ranch of Dreams*, 79.

[63] *Parade*, 1981, 56983, GCNPRL.

[64] Albin Krebs and Robert McG. Thomas, "For the 'Woman who has Everything': Burros," *New York Times*, December 6, 1980; Correspondence on Burros (1981–1986), GCNPRL; Greenwald, *Cleveland Amory*, 166–67; Marshall, *Making Burros Fly*, 59.

[65] Amory, *Ranch of Dreams*, 74.

[66] Marshall, *Making Burros Fly*, 59.

Burro being airlifted out of Grand Canyon National Park. Arizona Historical Society–Tucson Collections. Image #104681.

trails were dangerous for horses and frightened the burros.[67] The only viable option to remove canyon burros in large numbers would be cornering the animals along trails, corralling them, and, one-by-one, carrying them out in a sling below a helicopter.[68]

[67] National Park Service, *Feral Burro Management*, VIII-6-7.
[68] Marshall, *Making Burros Fly*, 60.

Starting on August 9, 1980, the date set by the NPS, the Fund for Animals worked in the canyon at the hottest time of the year in what turned out to be an exceedingly hot summer. To avoid the 120-degree heat at the height of the day, the removal crews worked in the early morning and late evening. The Fund for Animals team, with Park Resource Management Specialist Jim Walters monitoring, began to round up the burros at three in the morning. As one crew on horse and muleback herded the burros inside the canyon, another crew set up a corral on the plateau, and a helicopter crew hovered overhead. After corralling the burros, Amory described, workers "threw a rope around their neck, then tied their legs together, then put them in a sling, and finally, under a frighteningly noisy machine, took them higher up in the sky than any self-respecting animal and perhaps any reasonably wise bird had ever been before."[69] The Fund for Animals removed twenty-seven burros from the canyon on the first day. The crew repeated this procedure hundreds of times in August and September 1980 with between thirty and fifty animals removed each week.[70] "This is costing us some money to monitor the program," park employee Jim Walters told a reporter in 1980, "but not nearly as much as it would to shoot them, so it's a beautiful compromise for us."[71]

With the success of the Fund for Animals' removal, the NPS granted the organization an extension to the original two-month timeline. The Fund for Animals removed 577 burros from Grand Canyon in the two-year operation. The Fund for Animals adopted out the burros removed from the canyon. The adoption program was exceptionally successful on the east coast as the Fund for Animals advertised adoption as a way to own a part of Grand Canyon.[72] In 1980, Amory founded the Black Beauty Ranch on eighty-three acres in Murchison, Texas, to house the burros that had not found a new home. Burros not adopted by locals in the Southwest or hauled to the east coast moved to Texas where they remained for the rest of their lives.[73]

With the majority of the Grand Canyon burros in Texas and on the east coast, the NPS began the second phase of the

[69] Amory, *Ranch of Dreams,* 66–68, 79.
[70] Marshall, *Making Burros Fly,* 63.
[71] Molly Ivins, "Wild Burros Plucked out of Grand Canyon," *New York Times,* July 30, 1980.
[72] Greenwald, *Cleveland Amory,* 167; Amory, *Ranch of Dreams,* 79–80.
[73] Amory, *Ranch of Dreams,* 90–91.

burro-removal plan. For an estimated $26,250, the NPS built a two-and-a-half-mile fence along the boundary between Grand Canyon National Park and LMNRA to stop any burros from wandering back into the canyon. Several problems arose after fence construction. The wires required constant repair as burros and other wildlife pushed into posts, knocking over sections of the fence. Low water levels in the lake created gaps in the fence that allowed canyon access to burros. Despite admitted shortcomings in the design of the burro fence, the barrier prevented many feral burros from re-entering the canyon. It kept domesticated livestock out of the park, and it served as a boundary line between the park and LMNRA. For years after the removal, rangers tracked burro sightings, which grew increasingly rare.[74] "Feral burros are now absent from the river corridor," states the ecologist Steven Carothers in a 1991 book. The feral burro "evil" was officially a low priority problem for the park by early 1983.[75]

Burros have been, for the most part, absent from Grand Canyon National Park for thirty-five years. No one has conducted a follow-up study, however, to substantiate their impact on the canyon's soils, vegetation, or bighorn sheep.[76] "Surprisingly," a Grand Canyon wildlife research website states, "there has never been a follow-up survey to determine if the sheep population recovered and stabilized following the removal of the burro population."[77] Despite not being in the canyon, burros remain an important part of the area's history.[78]

Conclusion

Similar to previous grassroots campaigns against federal environmental agencies, public outcry against burro removal forced the NPS to consider public opinion. As a result, the NPS paused its

[74] Burro Surveys, Management Plans, Population Control, and Studies of Impacts (1934–1982), Population Control Folder, 103533, GCNPRL.

[75] Steven W. Carothers and Bryan T. Brown, *The Colorado River through Grand Canyon* (Tucson, 1991), 163; Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 19.

[76] Jackie Brown, "Bighorn Sheep Subject of Park Service Study," *Grand Canyon News*, May 10, 2007.

[77] Elaine Leslie, "Bighorn Sheep Studies," Grand Canyon Wildlife Research Expedition website (accessed February 24, 2017); Webb, *Grand Canyon, a Century of Change*, 248.

[78] Wills, "On Burro'd Time," 20; Amory, *Ranch of Dreams*, 65; Loretta Yerian, "Newbies to the Barn: Training Grand Canyon's Famous Mules," *News-Herald* (Lake Havasu City, Ariz.), January 31, 2016.

eradication efforts for a decade, stopped a program that had existed for forty-five years, and conducted expensive, time-consuming ecological studies. In the end, it prompted a compromise between the NPS, the public, and a non-profit organization. The compromise revealed that the NPS and other public-land-management agencies could not make large-scale decisions without listening to public opinion or risk facing public outcry. The burro-removal program further proved that media coverage and public interest in public lands, their management, and wildlife could influence NPS decisions.[79]

The removal of feral burros from Grand Canyon highlights the involvement of the public in national park policy especially after the rise of modern environmentalism in the mid-twentieth century. As the public focused on environmental issues across public lands in the 1960s, individuals and organizations vocally scrutinized NPS policies and utilized new federal laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and its EIS requirement to influence park policy. Specifically, public interest in the treatment of wild and domesticated animals directed protests at an NPS policy that would harm animals. The focus of Grand Canyon burro removal illustrates a specific concern that drove public involvement and explains the various ways people and organizations could voice their opinions. The public and the NPS directed additional attention to burros because of their image as a charismatic megafauna and their status as a non-native species in North America. As a result, burros created greater conflict regarding their position in the national park. As a charismatic megafauna, the public directed attention to the plight of the endearing animal. As an exotic species, however, NPS policy clearly excluded the animal from park ecosystems. By embodying both issues, burros highlighted the complex classifications humans applied to animals and how those categories can be in conflict.

Although the concern over burros in Grand Canyon had, for the most part, been resolved by the mid-1980s, the presence of feral burros on other public lands in the American West remained a contentious subject. NPS-managed lands in the Southwest, including Death Valley National Park and Mojave National Preserve, still had populations of feral burros. On these lands, burros were an exotic

[79] Marshall, *Making Burros Fly*, 66.

species and the NPS attempted to control the population by herding, fencing, and shooting the animals. The Wild Horse and Burro Act, however, allowed burros to live on nearby land managed by the Bureau of Land Management and burros often crossed onto park land.[80]

National parks that bordered public lands constantly faced the encroachment of feral burros, just as at the border between LMNRA and Grand Canyon National Park. On one side of an invented line, burros were a destructive exotic; on the other side, a federal law protected the animal. Just as some burros still entered Grand Canyon National Park, the animals crossed into Death Valley and Mojave where the NPS attempted to curtail their populations. However, keeping burros out of parks is no easy task. As long as the Wild Horse and Burro Act protects the animals, no park in the Southwest can guarantee burro-free status. In 2017, nearly twelve thousand burros roam public lands, mostly in Arizona, California, and Nevada. While federal regulations protect the animals from complete eradication, in some places, feral burros are still viewed as evil.[81]

[80] Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York, 2002), 180; Nicholas Brulliard, "The Burro Quandary," National Parks Conservation Association website, https://www.npca.org/articles/1409-the-burro-quandary (accessed September 6, 2019).
[81] Ibid.