

The Scottsdale Wild Horse Sanctuary in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve

Introduction

The horse is an essential component in the development and the mythology of the West. Scottsdale, the self-proclaimed “West’s Most Western Town,” embodies that identity, highlighted by the horse and rider at the center of the city’s logo. Now we are presented with a singular opportunity to prove the enduring truth of that claim, as well as our community’s compassion and benevolence, by stepping forward to save the endangered Salt River Wild Horses of the Tonto National Forest by relocating 50 to 60, (dependent upon family structure) into the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

In doing so, we will not only ensure that the wild horses will continue to live and run free, but reap other benefits as well, as the horses: increase biodiversity in the ecosystem; aid in the prevention of wildfire; reseed the range with mesquite trees; promote Scottsdale globally; increase visitors to Scottsdale and to the Preserve.

This report will consider each of these goals and discuss how they can be achieved.

It is important to note that this is the committee’s preliminary report. While we will answer the most consequential questions, city support will be required to finalize certain aspects of the plan.

Thus, the intent of this report is to definitively demonstrate the value and viability of the project so the city council will agree it is worth pursuing.

Background

The Tonto National Forest hosts close to 6 million visitors annually,¹ and many of those travel from near and far to see the Salt River Wild Horses. The horses, which have occupied these lands for untold generations, are protected pursuant to Arizona Revised Statute 3-1491 (the Salt River Horse Act), and the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group (SRWHMG) has managed the herd humanely since 2018 under contract with the Arizona Department of Agriculture (AZDA). The remarkable partnership between the federal government through the U.S. Forest Service, the state of Arizona via its Department of Agriculture and the nonprofit SRWHMG is not only unique but also uniquely successful. The contract under which SRWHMG has operated has expired and several parties, including SRWHMG, are vying to win it.

To date, the law protects the herd against harassment, chasing, interfering, killing and slaughter. Currently there are approximately 282 Salt River Wild Horses, with the population decreasing through attrition and fertility control. Now the Forest Service has made the unfortunate decision to reduce the herd more rapidly, and will expect the whichever nonprofit thus will conduct auctions to sell off a sizable contingent of horses. Though the stated intent is to place the horses in safe environments, when the government has taken such actions before horses have frequently ended up in factories in the U.S. and Mexico where they are killed and turned into food for human consumption. This was largely the fate of the Alpine Wild Horses from the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest in east-central Arizona, which saw 45 Alpine Wild Horses transported to a slaughter auction in Bowie, Texas.

Proposition

A group of 50 to 60 horses will be moved to the northern-most part of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. The precise boundaries will be determined based upon the area allocated; in part, factors to be considered include access to water and interaction with human visitors. An

¹ <https://www.wilderness.org/wild-places/arizona/development-tonto-and-coronado-national-forests#:~:text=The%20Tonto%20National%20Forest%20hosts,from%20the%20heat%20of%20Phoenix>

allotment of 10 acres per horse is a rough measure of optimal space; thus, anywhere from 500 to 600 acres is sought.

The sanctuary will be enclosed by fencing, with gated access for people (primarily cyclists) to move through the area. Thus, the addition of horses, who regularly encounter many tourists in the Tonto National Forest, many of whom specifically come to see the animals, will not negatively impact either species' ability to move freely and enjoy the land.

The horses will be chosen based on long-established family units, ensuring stability and harmony. (This explains why the exact number of horses is fluid within 10, so as to account for family structure.) The population will be managed through a combination of natural attrition, live births, and birth control measures.

Management

A new specific-purpose 501(c)3 will manage the sanctuary on the city of Scottsdale's behalf and under its guidance. This nonprofit will gather volunteers and support from the hundreds of Arizonans who already work for the betterment of wild horses, as well welcoming any others who will also want to participate. Much of this new force will come with vast experience in the care of horses in the Tonto National Forest, where they provide every service imaginable, including veterinary monitoring and care, fence repair, feed provisioning, facilities upkeep, and much more.

Also invited to engage in this endeavor will be the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, which has contributed so much to the vitality and integrity of the Preserve. It too has hundreds of volunteers, and can be a powerful ally to the new 501(c)3, if it so chooses.

501(c)3

As noted, a nonprofit organization will be organized to run the sanctuary and also solicit funds from the public and businesses to support its operation via a website which will feature video

and stories. It is conceivable that products such as T-shirts, hats or stickers could be offered on the site to raise more funds. The nonprofit will disperse funds as needed, and its bylaws and city oversight will ensure that money is only spent to further the mission within the preserve.

Water

The single critical component to sustaining the horses is access to water. On an average, horses require between 10 and 15 gallons per day. Thus, if we use the maximum figure of 60 horses and the maximum number of average gallons consumed, we arrive at 900 gallons per day, or 328,500 gallons annually. Considering that Scottsdale consumed some 3.23 billion gallons of water in 2024,² the maximum amount the horses will consume will prove negligible.

Three possibilities exist: wells are located and dug; the city expands pipe into the Preserve; 3 300-gallon troughs are set up and water is trucked in. Given that adjacent to the Preserve both to the north and the east are acres of homes with both wells and piped-in water, it is reasonable to assume that sufficient water resources will be discovered in the Preserve.

Additionally, once sufficient water is uncovered, a pond can be dug for the enjoyment of the horses and other wildlife.

Fencing

The most expensive and time-intensive (both in installation and maintenance) aspect will be fencing. Most likely fencing will be 4-strand 5.5 ft. fencing, with bottom and top wires smooth and 2 middle wires bared. This will allow other wildlife to easily cross the fencing, while confining the horses. The cost will be determined upon setting the locale, and various payment formulas are possible for both fencing and other necessary expenses, from the city alone to a joint agreement with the proposed 501(c)3, to complete reliance on the 501(c)3 and its fundraising capabilities.

² https://www.scottsdale.org/city_news/scottsdale-banking-huge-quantities-of-water/article_73odo39e-bf9d-11ed-8621-fb024751651d.html

Impact on Terrain

The threat of wildfire is always present in the Preserve, and with the right conditions, could prove devastating. Horses act to mitigate that danger by grazing on the grass and brush, thereby reducing that combustible element. In fact, this grazing eventually brings life to the land as the horses reseed the terrain with seeds, such as from mesquite trees.

There is no evidence that the presence of wild horses negatively impacts the land in any way.

Veterinary Care

To provide a humane habitat for the horses, they will need constant access to fresh water, edible forage and/or supplementation of feed to maintain herd health, and the construction of suitable shade structures.

Veterinary care for wild horses is designed to be as minimally invasive as possible, with our goal being to allow the Salt River Horses to live wild and free. However, humane management is designed to alleviate suffering. To this end, the health of the herd will be monitored closely by our volunteers. Any horse that exhibits a body condition score that is less than optimal will receive supplemental nutrition. Any injury or illness will be evaluated and monitored by a veterinarian. A corral will be constructed to utilize for veterinary intervention to treat injury or illness if necessary. Humane birth control, utilizing Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) will be utilized to maintain herd population numbers.

Supplemental Feeding

While the horses will feed off the grass and other natural growth found in the Preserve, at times, especially in the summer, supplemental feeding will be necessary and will be provided by sanctuary management.

All appendices found at the end of this proposal have been authored by Dr. Jennifer Johnson. Dr. Johnson has been a veterinarian for 32 years, and has volunteered with SRWHMG for 4

years, providing pro bono veterinary services and consultation, assisting in the medical care and management of the Salt River Herd. Appendices A and B provide more information regarding veterinary care. Appendix C addresses supplemental feeding and forage management. All 3 appendices explain how SRWHMG has fulfilled its responsibilities under its contract in the Tonto National Forest.

Note: It is instructive to understand how SRWHMG has managed the veterinary care of the wild horse herd under its purview, offering a guide to how the nonprofit could conduct these matters in the preserve.

Other Structures

Several structures need to be constructed. These likely include though perhaps are not limited to: perhaps 4 shade structures to blend in with the landscape, useful given the lack of large shade trees; a veterinary corral; and storage for feed.

City and Preserve Promotion and Tourism

Between 750,000 and 1 million people annually visit the Preserve, traversing over 230 miles of trails. While that might seem like a lot of visitors, consider that Pinnacle Peak Park alone, with just 150 acres, easily accommodates 250,000 visitors every year.³ Furthermore, the vast majority of the Preserve's visitors do not breach the northern-most area but rather enjoy the more popular trails such as Tom's Thumb, Gateway and Lost Dog. Assuming the horses attract visitors to the northern areas, they can be effortlessly absorbed within its vastness and restricted to existing trails. Additionally, visitors can be directed to selected spots designated for best viewing of the horses, thereby further containing the visitors' imprint.

The horses will provide a boon to Scottsdale's reputation and fame. One idea: We will place cameras in select locales, such as a water source, where the horses are most likely to

³ <https://www.experiencescottsdale.com/media/research/fact-sheets/outdoor-adventure/#:~:text=Between%20750%2C000%20%E2%80%93%201%20million%20people,free%20%E2%80%93%20including%20lectures%20and%20hikes.>

congregate, so anyone anywhere, any time of day, can watch their movements. This is reminiscent of the widely viewed bald eagle nest streaming videos that are provided by different NGOs and government agencies, some receiving hundreds of thousands of views, others reaching millions.

We will create curate photos, create logos and slogans, and build advertising messaging and campaigns of the new sanctuary and make them available to public and private tourism-related organizations and businesses.

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Appendix A

Protocol for Veterinary Care

The Salt River Wild Horse Management Group enlists the support of equine veterinarians for veterinary expertise and herd evaluation. It is the goal of wild horse management to allow horses to live free from intervention, however the quality of life of injured, sick and aged horses will be regularly evaluated for intervention on an individual basis.

The SRWHMG volunteers are trained to observe the herd for injury, illness and body condition. Any abnormality is documented in the herd database and the volunteer veterinarian and SRWHMG medical management team is notified.

If there is a horse that has a devastating injury which is impacting his quality of life, the management team will determine a course of action after consultation with the veterinarian. If warranted, as a last resort, sedation and humane euthanasia will be performed, following the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Guidelines for Euthanasia of Wild Horses. If a horse is injured, and medical management is deemed to be an appropriate course of action, the veterinary team will accomplish veterinary care in the field, with the use of low-stress dart sedation for examination. A treatment corral will be erected and utilized in the sanctuary for this purpose, with the goal of treatment and then release back into the general herd population as soon as possible.

Appendix B

Protocol for Population Management

The formation of the Sonoran Preserver Wild Horse Sanctuary will entail the relocation of between 50 and 60 wild horses made up of family band units with diversity representative of the entire Salt River population.

Each female horse (mare) will receive annual vaccination with PZP (Porcine Zona Pellucida) for prevention of pregnancy. PZP is over 95% effective in controlling pregnancy in horses and has been used by the SRWHMG as population control in the Salt River Wild Horse herd since 2019. The vaccine is injected with the use of an air rifle and dart injection, from a distance of at least 16 yards, which has proven to be successful in preventing stress and injury to the horses. Each darting is documented by video and horse information is stored in the SRWHMG herd database. Genetic diversity of the herd will be accomplished by choosing appropriate mares under 15 years of age to skip the yearly PZP until they become pregnant. Our goal is to achieve only one foal birth per year in the Sanctuary. If a mare has already contributed multiple offspring to the herd population, they will continue to receive PZP yearly until they are deceased. It is critical to remember that genetic diversity is the most important consideration in maintaining a robust herd health, and that mares selected to reproduce should only be chosen based on complete genetic representation. The lineage of the Salt River Herd has been carefully documented, and the Sanctuary horses will remain so documented, with the objective to maintain diverse and robust herd health.

Appendix C

Protocol for Supplementary Feeding and Forage Management

It is the goal of the Sonoran Wild Horse Sanctuary to be created as an environment capable of sustaining the health and well-being of 50-60 wild horses, by providing a varied grazing environment along with access to water, shade and tree cover. The desert landscape biodiversity is actually enhanced by natural grazing, whereby wild horses will choose their forage based on seasonal availability. We have noted that the Salt River Herd has evolved to ingest desert underbrush and grasses of great variety during the seasons, and aid in the control of dangerous fire fuel, especially when the spring bloom dries in the summer. The horses graze the dried grasses, helping to mitigate wild fire risk and reduce severity. Wild horses also ingest mesquite beans, and the resultant digestion and excretion of the beans in manure create a perfect environment for tree propagation and growth.

The need for supplemental feeding will be determined based on two factors: the condition of the forage resources, and the body condition of the horses. The body condition will be determined based on the Henneke Body Condition Scoring System, which uses a scale of 1 to 9, where a condition of 4-5 is ideal. Wild horses typically will have a seasonal body condition score variation between 3 and 7. Any horse that is determined to be a score of 3 or below will be individually assessed for illness or injury. If there is 20% of the herd that is trending towards a BCS of 3, the management team will determine if supplemental feeding should begin. Supplemental feeding will be accomplished with volunteers distributing high protein alfalfa hay on a schedule appropriate for the needs of the herd. The management group will attempt to choose feeding locations that maintain safety of the herd and the public. Every attempt will be to vary the time and location of feed stations to reduce the possibility of predator stalking and hunting. In the majority of cases, it is extremely difficult to supplement only one horse in the herd, but this may be accomplished with the use of a temporary corral space if necessary.

HENNEKE BODY SCORING SYSTEM



1. POOR

Animal extremely emaciated; spine, ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock projecting prominently; bone structure of withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable; no fatty tissue can be felt.



2. VERY THIN

Animal emaciated; slight fat covering over base of spine, ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock prominent; withers, shoulders, and neck structure faintly discernible.



3. THIN

Fat buildup about halfway on spine, slight fat cover over ribs; spine and ribs easily discernible; tailhead prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be identified visually; points of hip appear rounded but easily discernible; points of buttock not distinguishable; withers, shoulders, and neck accentuated.



4. MODERATELY THIN

Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernible; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it; points of hip not discernible; withers, shoulders, and neck not obviously thin.

5. MODERATE

Back is flat (no crease or ridge); ribs not visually distinguishable but easily felt; fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy; withers appear rounded over spine; shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.

6. MODERATELY FLESHY

May have slight crease down back; fat over ribs fleshy/spongy; fat around tailhead soft; fat beginning to be deposited along sides of withers, behind shoulders, and along side of neck.

7. FLESHY

May have crease down back; individual ribs can be felt; but not noticeable filling between ribs with fat; fat around tailhead soft; fat deposited along withers, behind shoulders, and along neck.

8. FAT

Crease down back, difficult to feel ribs; fat around tailhead very soft; area along withers filled with fat; area behind shoulders filled with fat; noticeable thickening of neck; fat deposit along inner thighs.

9. EXTREMELY FAT

Obvious crease down back; patchy fat appearing.