



What is "Natural" Fact vs. Fiction

by Mary Ann Simonds

The word "Natural" is often used today concerning many horse training techniques. But what is really natural for a horse?

Is it natural to ride a horse? Is it natural to put halters, bridles, bits and saddles on a horse? Is it natural to chase a horse around in a circle? Is it natural to tie a horse to a fence?



Is it natural for a horse to live in a stall without friends? These are just a few things we take for granted with horses interacting with humans, but -- ecologically speaking -- the word "natural" may be severely misused.

Wearing halters, bridles and saddles is not natural to horses. Training methods using any of these devices cannot by the scientific definition be considered natural. Methods may be considered "humane" or "inhumane," but not natural. Natural implies the horse would do this under natural circumstances living as a free horse. However, horses do make long-term friendships and establish leadership in a group, so methods teaching how to form social bonds with a horse may or may not be "natural."

Natural Horse Culture

To understand what is natural for a horse, we must first understand the real life of a horse. We must learn about horse culture. Today, there are very few wild horses living in natural environments without the influence of humans. Many of the horse experts who claim they have observed wild horses have either seen only a glimpse of one particular group, have seen only dysfunctional horses or human-influenced horses, or have never really gone into the field and lived with wild horses.

Horse culture is complex. Horse herds do not all fit the "Stallion-Harem Model" or the "Dominant-Hierarchical Model" as was once commonly thought. There is a loose hierarchical organization in horses with lead mares most often acting as the "social facilitators," but even this model does not always fit each group of horses. Although body language and communication are fairly universal, temperaments and learned behaviours influence each group of horses.

Sustainable herds (those who have the adaptability to survive various changes over time with sound reproductive strategy) have developed a variety of social customs allowing them to survive. Some common characteristics of all wild horses with high sustainability are:

- the ability to form long-term social bonds
- intelligent leadership
- clear communication among individuals in the herd



- minimum energy expenditure to maintain leadership, reproduce and obtain maximum resources
- good reproductive success

These are fairly common characteristics of many social mammals who live in family groups.

From a horse's perspective, let's investigate what might be "natural" for a horse by gaining insight into the real natural life of a horse born in nature. Depending upon the habitat and climate, breeding may take place almost any time during the year. Foaling season can start as early as January or February in warmer climates and as late as June or July in cold, high-elevation climates. Mares are usually bred back on their foal heat cycle, but breeding activities can continue with bonded male-female pairs even after conception.

Usually, lead mares are covered and settled first. This reinforces the leadership bond between lead stallion and lead mare ensuring her foal is born first and has the best chance to learn leadership skills. Often mares who have close friends will take turns as leaders and share status with the stallion. Usually there is only one stallion with a group of mares, although I have observed on several occasions stallions who are co-leaders, with each stallion appearing to have a favourite mare, but still sharing reproductive status. It is likely that these stallions grew up together in a bachelor band.

Foals are almost instantly taught about spatial awareness from their mothers and other herd members. Although youngsters are given a lot of leeway, spatial awareness and respect are critical for the safety of the foal and other herd members in case they must run from danger. If they did not have spatial respect they would run into each other and risk injury to all members.

Mares often leave the herd to foal and return with their new offspring to be greeted by the stallion and her mare friends. There is often much social joy expressed when foals are greeted. Greetings often follow an order of best friends first. Certain individual mares may be very protective, but most are eager to "show off" their newborn foals. Yearling foals may still be nursed by their mothers, although they will most often start running the yearling off to allow more nursing opportunity for the new foal. Yearlings and two-year-olds frequently are required to "baby sit" and play with babies while the mares

graze without interruption. Usually there are one or two mares who oversee this interaction of yearlings/two-year-olds to ensure it does not get too rough, although each mare keeps a close eye on her own offspring.

Stallions and mares may push two-year-olds out of the "natal band" or breeding herd. I have never seen a stallion breed any of his own offspring, although stallions often allow their offspring to co-exist with the herd, but slightly outside the breeding herd. Bachelor bands of stallions will frequently follow breeding herds





from a distance, watching and learning about reproductive strategy. Lead stallions may recruit a "sparring partner" for some "horse play" from bachelor bands. This is usually a stallion friend who still lives without mares. Some stallions live their whole life in a bachelor band of males, never gaining enough confidence and leadership skills to be accepted by mares. Young fillies and stallions can live together in juvenile non-breeding groups until fillies are recruited by a more experienced stallion or the juveniles mature and are accepted as reproductive partners with the fillies.

The Human Factor

So far, only breeders allowing horses to live freely on large open spaces providing for selection of reproductive partners and allowing foals to stay with their herd until they are "kicked out" could be considered "natural." But let's look at equine learning and the skills a horse must learn to be a happy functional "natural" horse. Since positive social bonds are crucial for horse survival, perhaps some horse-human interactions mimic what the horse would learn naturally. Much of horse behaviour is learned and behaviour does vary from herd to herd. Some herds are very sensitive and run from the slightest external stimulus, while others are more casual and prefer not to waste energy moving if they can stay still and eat without too much worry. Not unlike humans, horse temperaments vary and the horse culture and manners in each herd may be different, too.



What Horses Need to Learn in Nature—Without Round Pens, Halters, or Lead Ropes

A horse has to learn only a few basic things to live happily in a herd. It must learn spatial awareness and respect and be able to communicate to the other horses if it wants to be a leader. A horse must learn to stand still and be calm, which is important during the natural herd cycles of rest. And it must learn to move out of the space of a horse with higher leadership status and how to stand still if the leader wants to come into its space. A horse who listens and learns these simple things can happily fit in and live with a herd its whole life in safety and comfort.

It is important for foals to make friends with other foals. This gives them an opportunity to play, build friendships and establish leadership skills. Playing "one upping" is common among young horses and males without mares. This waiting-until-your-friend-is-not-looking to rush their space or bite their rumps or shoulders is often done. Those horses with the most awareness and the best ability to stay focused usually win and they will most frequently become leaders. They know how to make the other horses pay attention to them, because they are better at paying attention to other horses. They watch and wait and learn the right timing to "take space."

Any horse education systems teaching spatial respect and leadership simulating how horses build friendships using horse games, not people games, may be closest to what is natural for a horse to build friendships and leadership. Horses do not chase each other in circles, but they do chase each other out



of their space into another space. This is called "space taking." Male horses do a lot more "horse play" than mares. As fillies mature, they spend more time with other mares in slower social activities than stallions, usually pregnant and raising foals. Male horses enjoy more physically active games than mares. Mares use space taking only to establish respect and safe space and do not play nearly as much as youngsters or stallions as they age. This is important to remember when you select a training technique and why male horses respond better to round pens than mares. Mares see no point, as it is not fun and they have no place to find a safe space. Stallions or high-energy horses usually enjoy a good gallop and although they would "naturally" gallop straight will go in a circle under human restraints.

Why Horses Follow

Many methods using a form of "advance/retreat" to get the horse to follow the human, need to keep in mind horses -- especially young or green horses -- have a "follow reflex". It is "natural" for a horse to follow something it is curious about or because it is lonely with no other horse friends around or because it wants to herd you away. Horses do not necessarily follow because they respect the person as a leader, but more because a horse will follow almost anything that it is curious about and not afraid of hurting them. I have observed young horses following porcupines, sage grouse, sheep, antelope and other interesting looking creatures. Intelligent horses might follow, especially stallions, looking for the opportunity to herd the person away as they would any animal they view as non-threatening, but they don't want around.

This year at Equitana, a well-known trainer had a stallion following him who turned and kicked him in the kidneys knocking him down. It was very predictable if he had observed the warning signs the stallion was giving him, but he did not. So, not all horses follow because the person is the leader if the right communication and friendship has not been developed first.

Summary

It is misleading to call many training methods "natural" as they are not natural compared with the behaviours the horse would learn or use in nature. Natural should only reflect the methods that mimic what a horse would learn in its own culture under a natural environment. Many of the new training methods mix domination and manipulation methods by playing on the horse's innate instinct, associative learning and memory, and need to belong. Few methods actually have the goal of working in the horse's best interest by teaching a horse about horse culture and allowing the horse to make free will choices about its friends, space and use of its habitat. This would be "natural." It is misleading and sometimes dangerous to call a method "natural" implying to the human that the horse must like this natural technique, when in fact the horse may find it confusing or wrong. Horses might easily learn these techniques in order to please, but they are not natural. Training methods using less dominating techniques to gain a horse's cooperation should be referred





to as "more humane," "less abusive," "kinder," or more "intelligent," but not as "natural."

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[Anyone interested in wild horse behaviour who wants to learn more may contact Mary Ann

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