**Position Paper: Ethical Stewardship in the Salt River – A Moral Imperative for All Sentient Life**
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**Ethical Frameworks for Compassionate Stewardship**

Peter Singer (b. 1946), a philosopher whose work has significantly shaped contemporary discussions of animal ethics, has long maintained that moral responsibility should be based on whether a being can feel pain or distress, not on what species it belongs to. His seminal work *Animal Liberation* (1975) inaugurated a profound philosophical shift by insisting that ethical deliberation extend beyond the human to encompass all sentient beings whose interests are morally relevant. Singer’s insistence on equal consideration of interests—regardless of species—entails a radical impartiality: when faced with a conflict of interests among sentient beings, our obligation is to choose the course of action that minimizes total suffering and maximizes overall well-being. Such a framework does not permit sentimental attachments, symbolic associations, or political expediency to override the moral imperative of outcome-based reasoning. This foundational insight serves as an indispensable lens through which to examine the increasingly fraught question of the Salt River horse herd (SRHH) and its contested role within a fragile desert ecosystem.

Jeff McMahan, a leading figure in contemporary moral philosophy, extends this reasoning through a more nuanced account of moral status grounded in the capacities of sentient beings. In *The Ethics of Killing* (2002) and subsequent writings, McMahan argues that the wrongness of harming or killing a being depends on features such as sentience, psychological continuity, and the ability to flourish over time. While aligned with Singer in rejecting speciesism, McMahan is particularly attentive to gradations of moral consideration, holding that not all sentient beings necessarily have equal moral claims, but that all suffering still counts. His framework obliges us to consider both the experiential welfare of individuals and the broader consequences of our actions for populations and ecosystems. In practice, this means that while humans may bear additional responsibilities due to their cognitive capacities, the suffering of non-human animals—especially when preventable—demands serious ethical reckoning. Together, Singer and McMahan offer a framework for moral triage—one that requires us to assess not only the suffering of individual animals but also the systemic effects of population dynamics, habitat scarcity, and ecological degradation. It is precisely within such ethically entangled terrain that the Salt River horse herd presents one of the most urgent and symbolically fraught cases of applied animal ethics in the American Southwest.

The ethical obligations discussed here also resonate strongly with the insights of major religious traditions. **Indigenous perspectives** emphasize a deep, interconnected relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world. Many Indigenous cultures view the earth and all its creatures as sacred, fostering a profound respect for all life. This worldview promotes a sense of stewardship that prioritizes **reciprocity**, **balance**, and **responsibility** toward the environment and its inhabitants, including animals. In **Judaism**, teachings from the **Mishnah** and **Talmud** emphasize the importance of **compassion for animals**, with numerous passages encouraging humane treatment and cautioning against causing unnecessary suffering. For instance, the Talmud prohibits causing unnecessary pain to animals and encourages a balanced approach to resource use, highlighting humanity’s role as stewards of creation. In **Christianity**, the teachings of **Jesus Christ** highlight the importance of love and compassion, especially toward the marginalized and vulnerable members of society, which aligns with the broader Christian ethic of care for others. Furthermore, **Thomas Aquinas**, a seminal Christian philosopher, emphasized humanity’s role in **stewardship**, asserting that humans are morally obligated to care for God's creation, including the earth and its creatures, as a sign of respect for the divine order. In **Buddhism**, the concept of **interconnectedness** emphasizes that all living beings are fundamentally linked, and that the well-being of one affects the well-being of all. This understanding calls for actions that account for the well-being of all beings, acknowledging that the harm or benefit to one can reverberate throughout the ecosystem. In **Daoism** and **Shintoism**, these traditions emphasize **harmony with nature**, **compassion** toward all living beings, and **responsible stewardship of the earth** as key ethical principles. These traditions teach that humans are not separate from the natural world but part of an interconnected whole, reinforcing the importance of living in balance with the environment. These religious and philosophical insights underscore the ethical obligation to make decisions that consider the well-being of all sentient beings, not just human interests. The convergence of these teachings reinforces the idea that moral responsibility extends beyond humans and demands careful, compassionate deliberation in how we engage with the natural world

**Applying Ethical Principles to the Salt River Horse Herd**

Considered in toto, both philosophers and religious authorities offer a framework for moral triage—one that requires us to assess not only the suffering of individual animals but also the systemic effects of population dynamics, habitat scarcity, and ecological degradation. It is precisely within such ethically entangled terrain that the Salt River horse herd presents one of the most urgent and symbolically fraught cases of applied animal ethics in the American Southwest.

The Salt River horse herd, widely cherished as symbols of wild beauty and enduring spirit in the public’s view—and officially designated by the State of Arizona as a treasure to be guarded—occupy a cultural position that far exceeds their ecological role. Yet it is that very disjunction between symbolic meaning and material impact that demands ethical scrutiny. Although the herd was placed under formal management in 2018, following the award of a state contract to a nonprofit group authorized under HB 2340, oversight has been inconsistent and largely unaccountable to scientific review. The consequences are ecological, ethical, and increasingly urgent. Riparian systems along the lower Salt River—already vulnerable to climate stress and overuse—have experienced further degradation due to trampling, overgrazing, and competition for water and vegetation. These pressures are compounded by long-term aridification trends across the Southwestern United States, which have diminished the regenerative capacity of desert vegetation and intensified the fragility of water-dependent ecosystems. Most scientists anticipate that this drying trend will continue, forcing us to reconsider decisions made under previous climatic assumptions in order to more responsibly manage the ecological realities of the present and future. The impacts have tangible effects on native species such as mule deer, desert bighorn sheep, and migratory birds, whose survival depends on the same narrow corridors of habitat. To acknowledge the horses’ cultural and emotional significance is not to excuse ecological neglect. On the contrary, any ethically coherent response must take both seriously: the emotional and symbolic attachments people have to the horses, and the moral weight of the suffering experienced by *all* affected animals—horses included—whose lives are shaped by the choices humans make on their behalf.

From my perspective, which is rooted in the moral relevance of all sentient suffering and the responsibility to act with clarity and compassion, there is no justification for policies that allow preventable harm to continue in the name of sentiment, tradition, or indecision. What matters is not whether a policy is politically safe or emotionally satisfying, but whether it meaningfully reduces suffering while preserving the potential for sentient life to flourish. That requires a meticulous accounting of consequences. What are the ecological and ethical implications of continuing with current management practices versus modifying or replacing them? How do different options—including fertility control, habitat restoration, and, if necessary, relocating and rehoming—affect both the well-being of the horses and the broader ecosystem? Which approaches are most likely to reduce overall suffering while preserving the capacity of all affected species to flourish? Furthermore, how do continued pressures on already strained habitats affect the survival, health, and reproductive capacity of all species that depend on those ecosystems? Finally, how does the presence of horses in the Salt River ecosystem impact the recreational, cultural, and aesthetic enjoyment of humans, and how should this factor be balanced alongside the ecological and ethical concerns?

Answering these questions is critical to determining the most ethical approach, and in doing so, it becomes clear that while many advocates embrace fertility control as an ethically palatable compromise, I believe it is ethically insufficient on its own. Delay-induced suffering—resulting from insufficient population reduction, prolonged habitat strain, and disruptions to herd behavior and long-term genetic viability—must also be counted. Non-lethal interventions are not morally preferable *per se*; their justification depends entirely on their effectiveness in reducing aggregate suffering. Ineffective or symbolic measures—however politically expedient—may be less ethical than rigorously planned, minimally invasive efforts at relocating and rehoming, conducted with transparency and veterinary oversight.

I also believe we must be honest about the motivations behind policy decisions. If management strategies are shaped primarily by the preservation of a public narrative—rather than by serious engagement with ecological data—they fail the test of moral seriousness. Ethical decision-making must not be distorted by emotionally charged narratives, nonprofit branding, or fear of backlash. It must be anchored in ecological reality and a recognition that competing interests among sentient beings require hard trade-offs. That includes reckoning with the consequences of anthropogenic myth-making—where some species are elevated to near-sacred status, often at the expense of others whose suffering remains unacknowledged. Compassion cannot be limited to the most visible.

To remain ethically consistent, we must confront the uncomfortable proposition that genuine compassion is often incompatible with emotional simplicity. Preserving the ecological integrity of the Salt River ecosystem may entail difficult decisions—decisions that do not lend themselves to slogans or photographs but are nonetheless required by the moral logic of consequence. The calculus of suffering does not privilege visibility, charisma, or cultural symbolism; it privileges the quiet arithmetic of harm avoided and well-being sustained. If we are serious about minimizing suffering—not just for the Salt River horses, but for all affected species—we must be willing to act accordingly, even when the necessary actions are unpopular. Moral seriousness, as Singer’s and McMahan’s work jointly reminds us, demands more than sentiment; it demands the courage to do what is right, even—perhaps especially—when it is hard.