**Walking with Horses**🐎**, Thinking with Data** 📊

The public response to the recent 12News story broke my heart—but didn’t surprise me. Once again, the conversation turned hostile, fractured, and deeply personal. People threw around “facts” rooted in experience, others pointed to science—and few seemed willing to listen to one another.

But here’s what’s being lost in all the noise: there are **two kinds of knowledge** that matter in this debate—and we need *both* to protect the Salt River horses.

🔹 **Experiential knowledge** comes from walking the land, spending time with the herd, and noticing the relationships that form within and between bands. It reveals patterns of behavior, loyalty, and interaction that can’t be captured in charts.
🔹 **Scientific knowledge** comes from tools like satellite imagery, long-term forage studies, and ecosystem modeling. It helps us see large-scale patterns and long-term trends that aren’t visible in daily observation.

One reveals the emotional and social life of the herd. The other reveals the environmental systems that support or threaten their survival.
**Neither is enough on its own.** **We can only make informed and ethical decisions by bringing both kinds of knowledge together!**

The current management group has built its strategy on exclusion—discrediting critics, dismissing scientific evidence, and treating questions as threats. Rather than engage with ecological data, they frame science itself as the enemy.

**We must do better.**
The herd still walks the river. The question is whether we can walk together. 🌊

**See full paper in comments.**

**Walking with Horses, Thinking with Data**
*Bridging Experience and Science in the Salt River Herd Debate
Position Paper 2, Dr. John Mack*

I was distressed to see how quickly the public responses to the 12News story fell into the same divisive pattern we’ve seen too many times before. For a moment, I felt despair. How can we ever move forward to create a space where all people feel included, loved, accepted, and truly listened to? Has the culture of hostility and exclusion promoted by the current Management Group so thoroughly shaped our public dialogue that we are now trapped in cycles of conflict and blame? Then I came across a comment written by a woman from another part of the country. She began, “Thank you Simone & John…” From her outsider perspective, she recognized something many of us, so close to the tension, had overlooked: signs of unity and hope. That brief moment of clarity shifted my thinking. It made me ask, *What’s really going on here?* What follows are my reflections and observations in that spirit.

There are two fundamental kinds of knowledge that shape how we understand the world. One comes through *experience*—from doing, observing, living through something. The other comes through *study*—through books, data, research, and academic analysis. Both are powerful. And both are limited when they stand alone.

Experience teaches us what it *feels* like to walk a landscape, to watch a season unfold, to care for animals, or to witness a pattern over time. It builds intuition. But it can also be narrow—shaped by our specific place, community, and personal memory. Without outside perspective, experience can mislead us or lock us into assumptions that don’t hold true elsewhere.

Academic study, by contrast, gives us access to broader patterns. It allows us to see trends across decades and continents, to compare ecosystems, and to rely on data gathered systematically. But academic knowledge can be abstract. It risks missing the nuances that only firsthand engagement can reveal. It’s possible to have a PhD in ecology and still misunderstand a herd of animals you’ve never spent time with.

That’s why the most effective decision-making—especially in matters that involve land, animals, and ecosystems—has to draw from *both* types of knowledge.

Take our debate about what is the best approach to helping the Salt River Horse Herd live a full and abundant life.

As I’ve been reading through the posts and comments about the Salt River herd, I see many people stating “facts” with great confidence based on their personal experience. When someone raises an objection or offers a different view, a common response is: *“How many times have you been to the River?”* or *“Have you walked with the horses?”* These challenges reflect a strong belief in the value of firsthand experience—of being there, seeing with one’s own eyes, walking with the herd. And that kind of knowledge is, indeed, important.

What these individuals are drawing on is experiential knowledge. And that knowledge is deeply valuable. It brings insight into the daily lives of the horses, their movements, and their relationships to the terrain. It allows us to witness things a spreadsheet never could. Experiential knowledge can help us notice changes in an individual horse’s behavior, detect subtle shifts in herd dynamics, or recognize when a horse is injured or isolated. It allows us to see the herd as living beings, not just as numbers in a report.

However, experiential knowledge alone cannot reveal broader patterns that unfold slowly or invisibly across the landscape. It is often shaped by where we choose to look and what we expect to see. If we are focused on one specific area or one group of horses, we may overlook signs of stress elsewhere—declining plant diversity, subtle changes in river flow, or damage accumulating in less visible parts of the habitat. In this way, our experience can become narrowly focused, even when our intentions are good.

Experiential knowledge also cannot measure long-term declines in forage quality, detect subtle shifts in water availability, or assess whether the land is reaching a breaking point. These insights require scientific methods—tools designed to reveal patterns that are too gradual, widespread, or complex to detect through direct observation alone. Through long-term data collection, satellite imagery, vegetation surveys, and ecological analysis, academic knowledge allows us to quantify change, test hypotheses, and compare conditions across time and space. It provides a structured framework for drawing conclusions that are not dependent on a single point of view, offering a broader and more systematic understanding of the health of an ecosystem.

At the same time, academic knowledge has its own limitations. It can produce valuable data while remaining disconnected from the real-world conditions it is meant to describe. A researcher can analyze vegetation plots and herd numbers without ever having seen the horses move through the landscape. Models and charts can generalize what is, in reality, complex and fluid. And academic work often depends on averages, which can obscure the needs of individual animals or the meaning of a specific place. When stripped of context, academic knowledge can lead to well-intentioned policies that overlook lived experience or unintentionally cause harm. Without engagement on the ground, academic analysis risks becoming abstract—technically sound, but ethically or ecologically incomplete.

As the debates that are currently being waged on Facebook pages reveal, this is not just a disagreement over horses—it is a deeper fracture over who gets to speak, whose knowledge counts, and how we treat one another when we disagree. The tone has grown sharp. People talk past each other. We question motives instead of listening for meaning. And in the background of all this noise, the herd still walks the river, dependent on us to get this right.

This moment demands more of us. It demands that we hold space for both kinds of knowledge—the lived experience of those who walk the land and the scientific tools that help us see what no one person can see alone. It demands humility, discipline, and the courage to speak without contempt. The current Management Group has thrived on division. We cannot. If we are to move forward, it will be because we chose a different path.

The Salt River horses deserve more than our arguments. They deserve decisions shaped by both the immediacy of presence and the rigor of science. If we can learn to honor each kind of knowing—not as rivals but as partners—we may not only protect this herd, but begin to heal the fractures in our community.