

Uproar over burro plan

By LISA FALKENBERG Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle

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The legendary donkey tale is surely one of the most impressive animal rescue stories ever told.

In 1979, after learning that the National Park Service planned to exterminate hundreds of wild burros, descended from the gold rush days and living in the depths of the Grand Canyon, Cleveland Amory and The Fund for Animals organized an operation to airlift them to safety.

Using helicopters and expert ropers, the groups successfully lifted 577 burros from the 7,000-foot canyon and dropped them on their very own refuge in East Texas. Today, the Black Beauty Ranch in Murchison is home to 330 wild burros, including a beloved tottering old lady donkey named Friendly who is one of the original Grand Canyon evacuees.

Years later, the wild burros of Big Bend Ranch State Park haven't been as lucky.

The feral population, which wanders back and forth from Mexico, are deemed a nuisance by state parks officials and some wildlife biologists. They compete with native species, such as mule deer, for resources, they say, and threaten a plan to reintroduce Desert Bighorn Sheep into the park.

Culling controversy

Officials with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department say attempts to trap and remove the burros failed, or were deemed too expensive. So, another policy was discreetly — critics say covertly — implemented.

They started culling them.

Beginning in October 2006, state officials shot to death 71 wild burros in the state's largest park, prompting an internal investigation into allegations of animal cruelty against some senior officials in the department.

It wasn't just the killing of the revered beast of burden that caused the uproar; it was the way it was done.

The animals were shot "opportunistically" by two high-ranking agency officials as they happened upon the burros while roaming the park's backcountry. In some cases, the officials, both skilled marksmen, shot the animals from the road in their vehicles. The burros' carcasses weren't removed, but left to rot in various locations across the 300,000-acre park.

Employees upset

At one point, the officials used a helicopter to shoot several aoudad sheep. And several burros were killed even after the agency's Austin-based deputy director of operations, Scott Boruff, told them to stop, according to affidavits obtained through an open records request.

The officials — deputy parks director Dan Sholly and West Texas regional director Mike Hill, of Fort Davis — apparently neglected to communicate their shooting plans to park staff, who describe in affidavits how they were saddened and disturbed by foul-smelling carcasses they discovered over the

past year.

"Everywhere I go, the employees are talking about the burros being shot. The employees are very upset about it. They don't like just shooting the animals and leaving them to lie," said wildlife biologist Antonio Manriquez, a unit manager for the parks department. He said eradicating the burros by shooting them was "inhumane" and "against the mission statement of our department."

Luis Armendariz, the park's manager at the time, has said he ordered an investigation to find out who was shooting the burros.

"The burro carried the mother of the king of kings on their back," Armendariz was quoted as saying in The Big Bend Sentinel. "We should respect them for that."

Robert Garcia, the parks officer who Armendariz asked to investigate the matter, has told the Big Bend paper that some of the animals suffered, that foals were orphaned and some burros were shot in the belly or hip, without a kill shot.

Garcia retired earlier this month in protest of the burro issue, the Sentinel reported, while Armendariz, who had been with the agency for 35 years, retired last month after refusing a forced transfer. TPWD officials say the transfer wasn't related to the burros.

The two shooters, Sholly and Hill, maintain that the killings were about protecting the native habitat and never for sport. Sholly said they tried to kill the burros quickly but couldn't guarantee there were none wounded. He called the shootings an "extremely sad and distasteful thing to do." He said that when he was a boy he had a burro named Croppy.

"We were trying to do what needs to be done quietly, without attracting attention," Hill said.

Last week, the department's internal investigation cleared the two of animal cruelty allegations and said they had not violated any state laws, although they failed to notify proper authorities, according to agency policy.

If the shooters had aimed their rifles at burros in Big Bend National Park, it would have been a different story. The animals there are protected under the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

There's a reason these protections exist. Horses and burros aren't viewed the same way as feral pigs, no matter how many times the parks agency mentions them in the same breath. We don't eat equine. And horses and burros are enduring symbols of the American West and rural life.

Since the story broke, Richard Farinato, who runs Black Beauty Ranch, says his group has reached out to TPWD to offer help. A California rescue outfit is planning to visit soon.

Boruff, the state parks operations director, said he's willing to work with the groups. He said the agency has declared a moratorium on shooting the wild burros and is planning to seek public comment through its Web site and in statewide hearings.

All this communication and public involvement is a good thing, but it could have come a bit earlier — before state officials started opening fire on wildlife in public lands without the permission of the public.

NOTE: In my column last week on renovation woes at DeBakey High School for Health Professions, I did not mean to imply that Detroit-based J.O.A. Construction was solely responsible for the defective

construction. Although it was the only contract HISD has terminated, much of the work was completed by a replacement contractor.

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