

## **Wild Burros: Death Valley's 'aliens'? - wild burros as non-native habitants of Death Valley National Park**

[The Environmental Magazine, Sept-Oct, 1997](#) by [Chris Hayhurst](#)

Rescuing threatened wild burros in California's Death Valley National Park is no easy feat. For the husband-and-wife team of Gene and Diana Chontos, founders of Wild Burro Rescue, it means - for starter - hitching their truck to a four-horse stock trailer and driving 1,200 miles from their home in Washington's Cascade Mountains.

Then things get really tough. The burros, which would be shot by the National Park Service (NPS) if not removed, have to be tracked down by helicopter (rented at \$400 an hour) in the park's remote washes. The kicking, fighting burros (the male "jacks" are particularly dangerous) have to be lassoed, corralled, and loaded into the trailer, ready for the long drive back to the Chontos' 20-acre sanctuary, which is now home to 40 burros. Gene Chontos says he "cries all the way back - I hate taking the burros from their homes." The burros, descendants of animals brought to Death Valley by 19th-century prospectors, are a "non-native" species in the park. According to Ann Holeso, NPS public information officer for the 3.5-million-acre Death Valley National Park, the burros "threaten native bighorn sheep by fouling their water supplies. We need a manageable burro population, but as long as Wild Burro Rescue can keep taking them out, we'll suspend our shooting policy." From 1987 to 1995, NPS killed 400 burros in the park, fulfilling a plan it euphemistically called "direct reduction." Burros are also under similar threat at the newly-created 1.4-million-acre Mojave National Preserve.

Some environmental groups sympathize with NPS' position. Rich Leibold, a Kingman, Arizona Sierra Club conservation chairman, says that "burros have a place in the Southwest, but they breed at a fantastic rate and shouldn't be allowed to take forage away from native animals." Of particular concern, he says, is "NPS" glamour ungulate, the bighorn sheep." Leibold says the Sierra Club opposes shooting burros, preferring the adopt-a-burro policy jointly pursued by the Bureau of Land Management and NPS at Lake Mead in Nevada. (Unfortunately, fees for burro adoptions are only \$100, and it costs \$700 to catch and care for them, says Kent Turner, chief of resource management at Lake Mead.)

Gene and Diana Chontos, who live in the barn with their rescued burros, are very particular about who adopts them. Farm Sanctuary, an animal rights shelter in New York and California, has taken 10, but hopeful hunters haven't been allowed any. "We keep ownership of them," Gene Chontos says. "People take them in foster situations, with live care contracts." And it's plain he loves burros: "They're more intelligent than horses, and can go three to four days without water. They're amazing animals." CONTACT: Wild Burro Rescue, 665 Burnt Ridge Road, Onalaska, WA 98570/(360)985-7282.

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## **DEFENDING the DESERT.(California desert protection act)**

[National Parks, January, 2000](#) by [CLARKE, WENDY MITMAN](#)

Five years after passage of the California Desert Protection Act, progress has been made in ensuring the protection of 7 million acres of desert wilderness, but more work needs to be done.

FIVE YEARS AGO, President Clinton made land protection history by signing legislation that set aside more than 7 million acres of desert wilderness on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and National Park Service (NPS) lands in southeastern California. The California Desert Protection Act expanded Joshua Tree and Death Valley national monuments, redesignating them national parks, and created a third ...