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Strange horse slaughter journalism at USA Today

September 1, 2008

by John Holland

In her opinion piece on horse slaughter titled [Homeless on the Range](#) (August 14th 2007 USA Today), Mary Zeiss Stange demonstrates a remarkable journalistic ability to ferret out the truth and then painstakingly avoid it.

As I read Dr Stange's article with growing incredulity, I was reminded of the astute observations of the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts," and "There are some mistakes only someone with a PhD can make".

Dr Stange's research on the subject of horse slaughter appears to have been limited, in my view, to watching old Kirk Douglas movies, reading Oren Dorell's earlier USA Today article "US shelters saddled with unwanted horses" (March 2008), and googling a few pages on the internet.

Fact-checking limitations were clearly demonstrated by the inclusion of a quote from Dorell's article attributed to Julie Caramante. Dorell had already apologised for committing the journalistic no-no of incorrectly attributing the statement to Caramante, with whom he had never spoken.

Dr Stange opens with a subtitle claiming that horses are being abandoned in the thousands. But instead of offering some evidence in support of this statement ([and there is none](#)), she goes on to claim: "The single overriding cause of surplus horses is the movement to ban the sale of horses or their meat for human consumption."

While Dr Stange later mentions that more horses are being sent over the borders to slaughter in Mexico and Canada, she skillfully avoids the inconvenient fact that these increased exports have resulted in more American horses being slaughtered this year than before the plants were closed.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, through June of this year we sent 65,899 horses to slaughter as opposed to only 63,650 for the same period of 2006 (the year before the closures). This unfortunate statistic entirely belies the Stange claim of causation for all the supposedly abandoned horses.

There is no documented evidence that horse abandonment is epidemic or even significant, and there is at present no lack of a "slaughter option" for owners who wish to betray their equines with a tortuous trip to brutal slaughter.

Economics

Statements which are, in my view, unsubstantiated, run through Stange's article like the abandoned horses galloping through her furtive imagination. Even when she cites valid data, Stange manages to misquote it. For example, she claims: "There are, to begin with, too many horses in the USA: 9.2 million as recently as 2005, up from 5.3 million in 1999".

These numbers imply that the horse population nearly doubled in just 6 years, but while the [9.2 million](#) figure is correct for 2005, the 5.3 million figure (actually 5.25) was from an American Horse Council (AHC) study done in 1986, not 1999. The actual period of this increase was 19 years, not 6, hardly explosive growth.

Even when Stange uses real data to make her points, she cherry picks it to support horse slaughter. For example, she points out that the AHC study found a third of all horse owners had an annual income of \$US50,000 or less, inferring that many horse owners cannot afford to take care of their horses. But this figure includes people in situations that allow them to

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to take care of their horses. But this figure includes people in situations that allow them to take very good care of a horse for very little money, including people who live in rural settings and own land with good grazing.

Stange fails to mention a more telling economic statistic from the same study. The study estimated that the American horse industry earns about \$US141 billion a year either directly or indirectly. When one considers that the horse slaughter industry is estimated to pay horse owners only about \$US40 million a year, we are left with the fact that horse slaughter represents only about 0.03%, or one third of one tenth of one per cent, of the income horses generate.

Unwanted horses

A postscript to the article claims that in 2007 the Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC) estimated that 170,000 abandoned horses lived in the United States. Contacted about this estimate, the UHC said they had no knowledge of where this came from and that they had no such data.

This is followed by several press reports as proof of an epidemic of abandonment and neglect which, according to Stange, was the result of the closing of the US-based slaughterhouses. It took little investigation to prove that these examples were flawed. One example references the case of Francine Derby who had 120 starving equines seized from her Central Florida ranch in May.

The Derby story was about a long-term case of hoarding and had nothing to do with the current situation or the closing of the slaughter houses. Morgan Silver, executive director of the Horse Protection Association of Florida, said that she filed a police report on the deplorable situation regarding Derby's horses back in 2003, four years before the first plant closings. At that time, Derby already had more than 100 equines, mostly ponies and miniatures. And as to the pretense that Derby was a "rescuer", she had 45 stallions and was breeding the animals, according to Silver.

Another example given to prove the dire consequences of having closed the US plants states: "It is estimated that 200 of 1200 wild horses overpopulating the Virginia Range near Reno, are actually '[strays](#)'. Many won't survive in the wild, and the mustangs could be at risk of disease from domestic horses."

Stange breaks appears to have fallen victim to the ancient and laborious process called Chinese Whisper Syndrome, in which a story is repeated countless times until it bears no resemblance to the original.

The quote Stange cites is from the Las Vegas Review Journal, but it is not "200 of the horses in the Virginia Range". The quote, attributed to Nevada's Agriculture Director Tony Lesperance, read, "although people refer to the 200 horses in the Virginia Range as wild horses, they technically are strays - horses that may have been set free by their owners".

The Nevada Department of Agriculture (NVDA) has long contended that all 1200 (not 200) Virginia Range horses are "strays" and that is undoubtedly what Lesperance said or meant to say. This does not mean any of them were recently abandoned. [They have been there for a very long time.](#)

The NVDA calls the horses "strays" because they do not belong to the original Spanish horse bloodlines (Ironically, the Spanish horses were also "strays", but that is another story). The importance of this distinction is that the Virginia Range horses are not protected under law as "mustangs", thus freeing the hands of the NVDA to dispose of the horses as they please.

Craig Downer, a wild horse expert who monitors the Virginia Range horses, says that no recently abandoned or stray horses have been detected in the herds. He adds that far from starving from overpopulation, the [Virginia Range horses](#) are thriving.

In a single paragraph, Stange, in my view, both proves Moynihan's observation about mistakes only a PhD can make and creates a new entry in the lexicon of journalism that I predict will forever be known as Stange Whisper Syndrome.

So why do writers like Stange, Dorell and many others keep producing these pieces that defend horse slaughter?

The horse slaughter proxy war

One has only to read the animal agriculture trade journals and magazines to get a clear impression of what appears to be going on. The assault on the anti-horse slaughter legislation is nothing more than a proxy war against animal welfare organizations and the so called "animal rights" movement.

The motivation for this assault is the belief that such a law would be a victory for the welfare groups and a step onto a slippery slope that might lead to other animal protection legislation. As in all wars, the innocent (in this case the horses) are the victims.

The paranoia runs far deeper than the horse issue. Cattlemen at a recent Texas A&M seminar were told that recent video documentation of the incredibly inhumane treatment of "downer" (non-ambulatory) cattle at a California slaughterhouse was just the first step

downer (non-ambulatory) cattle at a California slaughterhouse was just the first step toward stopping the slaughter of cows, pigs, sheep and goats.

And why might Dr Stange, the author of *Woman Hunter*, coauthor of *Gun Women* and author of the pending book *Sister Predators* be motivated to write such a piece?

One can only ponder such mysteries, but we might have expected that with 50 years of experience as a Montana hunter and journalist, Stange would have thought to bring some ammunition to this war.

Writers who attack animal welfare organizations cannot simply say, "we think you are after our cattle and pigs, so we are not going to let you protect the horses". Instead, they make up tales about a plague of abandoned and unwanted horses and pretend to care about the horses as they drive their fiction home in article after article.

So why should the average American care about this? The answer is as simple as it is profound. If we cannot trust publications like the *USA Today* to tell us the truth on this subject, how can we trust them on any other?

Dr Stange chose to open her article with a scene from *Lonely are the Brave* in which the Kirk Douglas character pays dearly for the decision not to abandon his beloved mare Whiskey. Perhaps it would have worked better if she had chosen to paraphrase Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*;

Facts? Facts? We don't need no stinking facts!

John Holland is a freelance writer and the author of three books. He frequently writes on the subject of horse slaughter from his small farm in the mountains of Virginia, where he lives with his wife, Sheilah, and their 12 equines. Holland serves as senior analyst for *Americans Against Horse Slaughter*, an organization composed entirely of volunteers.

[Horse slaughter in the news](#)

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