

Summary concerning Bonaire's Wild Donkeys and Ecosystem

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Bonaire's donkeys are not being given their due consideration, but are being targeted for blame. Though they have inhabited the island for five centuries, all of a sudden they are being made scapegoats for ecological imbalances that are basically human-caused.

The serious problem of automobile accidents with donkeys is not their fault and must be solved by people through increased public education, including both locals and visitors, better signs, effective speed bumps, Strieter Light Reflectors, strict law enforcement by police, etc.

Donkeys are excellent soil builders, contributing vital humus that makes soils more nutrient-rich and water-absorptive. They are also major dispersers of the intact seeds of many plant species. They create a more bio-diverse ecosystem. A wild-donkey-containing ecosystem is an enhanced ecosystem!

Through foraging, wild donkeys greatly reduce dry flammable vegetation and prevent catastrophic fires. And they also open up thickets so that other animals, including humans, can pass. By contributing the above-mentioned humus, they help turn the ground into a "living sponge" that retains rainwater and dew and benefits all life on the island, also preventing fires.

The family of the donkey: Equidae had its origin and long-standing evolution in the Americas, especially North but also including Meso- and South-America. These are not the "feral destructive exotics" their critics claim they are. As a matter of fact, donkeys and horses can help restore the native forests of the Americas by passing the seeds of many of the trees, often with hard coats, through their digestive system. They are being re-introduced and let go to live in Costa Rican parks and other places for this very reason.

It is very unfair to merely lump, or group, donkeys with domestic livestock and then target them for elimination. This is dishonest and unfair, and not at all objective and scientific.

The natural habit of donkeys is to disperse their foraging over large areas and to keep on the move. The males also establish and defend territories. This signifies that the "climax" donkeys can form a mosaic of territorial patches that when filled trigger self-limitation within the donkey population. This occurs by both social and physiological means, as resources become limited. For this reason it is very counterproductive to "gut," or greatly reduce, a donkey population. This sets back this self-limiting process.

Ecological studies need to distinguish donkey impacts from other impacts such as land clearance by people, domestic livestock, pollution, mining of salt or limestone, monopolization of natural water sources, etc. Post-gastric (caecal) digesting donkeys actually complement pre-gastric (ruminant) goats, sheep, deer, etc, as well as the entire life community when given the chance. This has been proven in elaborate studies by ecologists and is known by many people who live close to Nature.

As genetically proven, Bonaire's wild donkeys are a pure strain of the Nubian Wild Ass, which is in Critical Danger of Extinction. This has been determined by experts in the field and is the judgment of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Equine Specialist Group. The Nubian Wild Ass is on the Red List of

Threatened and Endangered Species. They are protected by international treaty, to which the Netherlands is a co-signer.

As a professional wildlife ecologist with expertise in the order of the donkey and as a member of the IUCN SSC, I am calling for the immediate halt to all further capturings and castrations/neuterings of Bonaire's Wild Donkeys. Bonaire's wild donkeys should also be protected as a unique island race that has developed over 500 years and is integrated into the life community here, a unique historical and cultural heritage. Wells should be reactivated throughout the island and the donkeys that are in the towns and cities will go back to the wild. The current program that puts the castrated, tagged males back on the island is only exacerbating the problem of automobile accidents, as is the removal of the females and their grouping in sterile holding yards, where they attract males. This is not the way to prevent accidents, but it is the way to exterminate what appears to be the largest remaining population of the critically endangered Nubian Wild Ass!

The IUCN SSC Equid Specialist Group recommends that a viable donkey population in the wild should contain at least 2,500 individuals who are fertile. People must stop destroying the last of Bonaire's reproducing donkeys, as is currently happening either through culling or castration/neutering. This will lead to a dead-end population that will die out in a relatively few short years, i.e. the lifespan of a donkey.

We need to employ an intelligent and caring Reserve Design to ensure the future survival of Bonaire's wild donkeys as a genetically viable, ecologically integrated, and naturally self-stabilizing population. Water sources must be provided throughout the island for the proper distribution of the donkey population and they must have adequate forage for a viable population. The donkeys must be fenced out of areas with many people, traffic, etc., or otherwise prevented from having accidents in these areas. The collaboration of local residents as well as visitors in this program must be elicited by enthusiastic officials and laymen alike who have a heart for and an understanding of these ancient yet ever renewing animals.

Ecological studies must be done to determine the exact impacts of donkeys and how we people can live in harmony with them. Enlightened change can come to the beautiful Island of Bonaire; and people can learn how to share the land and freedom with such wonderful past helpers of mankind but whose truer place is the wholesome and balanced world of Nature. These are amazingly wise, strong, and hardy, ancient companions on our planet from whom we have much still to learn and to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude for past service rendered—and it is not right to eliminate them from Bonaire!