



“Horse Rich, Dirt Poor” Video Discussion Guide

Key Idea

Currently, more than three times as many wild horses and burros are roaming the range as the ecosystem there can support, and their population continues to grow. These wild horses present the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other land management agencies with an array of challenges. Overpopulation harms and threatens habitats for birds, fish, other animals, and native plants. In locations that lack sufficient resources, horses and burros suffer and may perish from hunger and thirst. There is no simple solution to the problem: all possible strategies, such as fertility control and increased adoptions, involve trade-offs.

Background

The film “Horse Rich, Dirt Poor” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6h242vy_q8) highlights ecosystem challenges that face land managers, as more than 80,000 wild horses and burros live on public lands that can support only 27,000 of these iconic creatures. The BLM manages and protects our nation’s wild horses and burros on 26.9 million acres of public lands across 10 western states. The goal of the Wild Horse and Burro Program is to ensure healthy wild horses and burros on thriving public rangelands, using all available management tools under the 1971 Wild Horses and Free Roaming Burros Act. Though the BLM has shepherded 245,000 wild horses and burros through the adoption process, the agency still cares for 50,000 unadopted animals off the range at an annual cost of \$49 million.

Overpopulation causes overgrazing, which negatively affects ranchers, native plant communities, and the habitats that support myriad animal species, including the greater sage-grouse, which could be listed as threatened or endangered if its numbers and habitat continue to shrink. Invasive plant species often move into areas where native plants are destroyed by overgrazing. Some of these plants, such as cheatgrass, establish monocultures and intensify the wildfire cycle. The BLM has carried out numerous strategies to address overpopulation, from promoting adoptions to improved fertility control. Such efforts have been beneficial, but because of the steep cost of supporting wild horses and burros off range, it is challenging for the agency to come up with a sustainable solution.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. RI.7.1. Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies. D2.Civ.3.6-8. Examine the origins, purposes, and impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements.

Next Generation Science Standards. MS-LS2-1. Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the effects of resource availability on organisms and populations of organisms in an ecosystem.



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Discussion

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the video by reviewing the elements needed for an animal’s habitat (food, water, cover). Let viewers know they will see a video showing how overpopulation of one species affects habitats of other animals and plants. Ask if they can think of an example of the overpopulation of one species disrupting habitats for other species (e.g., deer without predators who strip vegetation from an area, Asian carp overwhelming a river system). Describe the result as an ecosystem becoming unbalanced.

Explain that more than 80,000 wild horses and burros live on public lands that can support only 27,000 of these animals. They will see scientists and others in the video describing how wild horse and burro overpopulation affects a riparian (streamside) habitat, grazing, and wild horses and burros themselves.

ENGAGING WITH THE VIDEO

Distribute or post these discussion questions, and let viewers know that these will be the focus of a discussion after the video:

What management strategies are used in the thriving meadow?

What is the limiting resource in the meadow?

How much money does the BLM spend each year caring for the over 50,000 excess wild horses?

What impact does the overpopulation of wild horses and burros have on trout, and how specifically is trout habitat affected?

What is the “worst case scenario” for the future?

What are the pros and cons of interventions such as fertility control and increased adoptions?

REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENT

Classroom teachers may want to give students the following reflective writing prompt to demonstrate their understanding of the story.

Select one of these possible strategies to address wild horse and burro overpopulation and research a) how much of a positive impact the strategy would have, and b) the negative consequences of the strategy.

Increased fertility control

More incentives for adoptions

Introducing predators such as coyotes or wolves