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Wild horses - symbol of the West moving east?

Barbara Clarke

Friday, March 12, 2010

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The DreamCatcher Wild Horse and Burro Sanctuary in Northeastern California is home to 225 horses and burros and supporter of the federal ROAM Act (S1579), which provides added protections for wild horses.

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The ranching community still believes in the 19th century notion of Manifest Destiny: the right to claim the West for human endeavors.

And this is no small notion. For Salazar, a fifth-generation rancher, the belief that the West belongs to ranchers - and by extension, cattle - is deep and pervasive. For more than 150 years, the livestock industry has clawed its way across the continent in search of forage for hungry cattle and sheep. This neo-exploration was and still is backed by the federal government through subsidies and ridiculously low grazing fees.

And even though the prairies and rangelands once supported millions of grazing wildlife, including buffalo and mustangs, by the beginning of the 20th century the once-lush rangeland west of the Mississippi had been reduced to stubble, with native grasses obliterated and alarming damage done to waterways.

Anything and anyone that threatened this quest, or was seen as a competitor for forage, was soon eliminated. American Indians were pushed off ancestral lands and whole species were slaughtered in the name of protecting livestock and grazing. Wolves, coyotes, eagles, bears, ground squirrels and wild horses came in the crosshairs of powerful weapons with the full support of our nation's leaders.

The American government wanted the West. The ranchers gave it to them. And in no small way this has made cattle and all the issues surrounding them politically untouchable.

A rancher was quoted in a documentary about the problems involved with the reintroduction of the nearly extinct Mexican wolf as saying, "We don't want them." No science. No statistics. No reason or clear argument. Just "we don't want them."

That statement is the crux of the whole problem facing animals in the West today, and the basis for Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's opinions on how to manage the dwindling herds of wild horses.

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So it is no surprise that with the appointment of a rancher to head the Department of the Interior, the president - who espouses change but is granting a \$26 million increase in budget for Salazar to remove wild horses from federal lands - has opened the door to an increase in the agonies that accompany Manifest Destiny.

Wild horses, which have a clear fossil and DNA lineage to our continent, are being pushed off of lands set aside for them by Congress in unprecedented numbers in the dubious name of saving them from starvation or protecting ecosystems. Yet observers at roundups continue to see healthy horses being captured, thriving rangeland and most notably, no decrease in the number of cattle allowed to graze the same supposedly sensitive areas.

This rush to sweep wild horses off the rangeland has the full support of Salazar. And why not? When he looks at the mustangs, he sees them through a 150-year lens of ranching. Wild horses are competitors for forage, inhabit areas wanted for mining and do not generate hunting fees. So Salazar wants them transplanted back East - somewhere, on pseudo-sanctuaries, at a cost of \$96 million, where he believes people will pay to watch once-wild horses eat grass all day.

His plan is not surprising. It is the final chapter in the long saga of claiming the West. Soon the horses, like the buffalo and the wolf and so many other beings, will be mere shadows of the species they once were. And our president, and his appointees, can go down in history as those who stole the magnificence of the West from our children.

Barbara Clarke is director of the 2,000-acre DreamCatcher Wild Horse and Burro Sanctuary in Northeastern California, home to 225 horses and burros and supporter of the federal ROAM Act (S1579), which provides added protections for wild horses.

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