

The Evolution of Wild Horse Management: Bridging the Gap Between Animal Welfare and Ecosystem Sustainability



Dr. Julie Murphree is a wildlife conservation biologist with expertise in the ethical complexities at the intersection of animal welfare, animal rights, conservation biology, and public policy, with a particular focus on the management of wild horse populations. As an Assistant Teaching Professor at Arizona State University, she has taught courses in Wildlife Management, Ethical and Policy Issues in Biology, Wildlife and Domestic Animal Nutrition, Equine Science and Captive Animal Behavior Management. Dr. Murphree's research examines the human-animal bond, cognitive ethology, and the impact of societal values on species-specific management strategies, aiming to balance ecosystem conservation objectives with the welfare of individual animals. Additionally, she explores environmental enrichment opportunities for captive species, focusing on how these initiatives can improve their overall welfare and well-being.

In this talk, Dr. Murphree will delve into the philosophical, social, and scientific considerations involved in managing wild horse populations, with a particular focus on the increasing numbers of free-roaming horses in arid regions. Over the past several decades, wild horse management has become one of the most contentious issues in public land management here in North America. Without effective management, wild horse populations can grow by 15-20% annually, competing with cattle, deer, elk, and bighorn sheep for vital forage and water resources. This competition between ungulates threatens delicate riparian ecosystems, leading to soil compaction and overgrazing. While most U.S. policies advocate for the removal of these "non-native" horses, horse advocates continue to push for more territory and rights. Dr. Murphree will introduce the concept of compassionate conservation, a framework that prioritizes the welfare of individual animals while maintaining the health of ecosystems. She will examine how this approach can be applied to the management of wild horse populations, ensuring both ethical treatment and ecological sustainability. The talk will compare traditional conservation practices with rewilding methods and explore how wild horses can be managed in a way that balances animal welfare with broader ecological goals.

