

Forester's Log: Swimming with Wild Horses

©Mary Stuever

The Forester's Log is a monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Stuever is a forester in the American Southwest. She can be reached at sse@nmia.com.

I have recently been reminded, that here in the arid Southwest, water is a huge attractant. Last week, I returned home from an Arizona forestry field trip where a central theme had been the environmental impacts of large populations on watered environments. I was debriefing with a friend and my mother, and explaining that hordes of humans were not the only animals attracted to water. In my own home town, a rural suburb near Albuquerque, a herd of free-roaming horses often come into my neighborhood to drink at my neighbor's water tank. Occasionally, I went on to explain, one of the little foals fall into the square concrete enclosure and cannot get out unassisted.

The next morning, on my way to work, I notice these wild horses in the neighbors' yard, and so I glance over at the tank. Sure enough: a baby horse head is visible above the concrete rim. I turn back toward the house to start the rescue process. I gather my houseguest Rose, call my wild horse-enthusiast friend Laura, and head down to the tank. This little guy (girl?) is clearly cold, and upon our arrival demonstrates that he is able to get his front legs out of the tank, but not able to make an exit. Rose heads off to a nearby horse stable to seek help, and I gather cinder blocks to build a step in the tank to assist the horse's self-rescue attempts.

When I worked on post-wildfire recovery, one of our many tasks was to round up feral horses. We needed to reduce the free-roaming horse population so newly recovering vegetation could become well established and prevent massive soil erosion. The relationship between a horse population and the vegetation on the land requires a careful balance if both are to thrive. By reducing the herd, which fortunately had had 900 animals removed five years earlier, we could reduce soil loss, but still provide for a herd that in many ways embodies the free-roaming spirit of the Apache people that co-habit the reservation and admire the wild horses.

The troubling challenge was what to do with the horses we captured. We could not sell them to the reservation residents, or they would end up back on the range we were trying to protect. So, the program funders required that we sell them off the reservation, which meant a trip to the auction for most animals. I bought one, and now keep him with a neighbor. My relationship with this free spirited partner has opened me to the amazing world of horses. It has also made me keenly aware of how many horses need good homes.

Finding homes for horses that exceed the size of the herd an ecosystem is able to support seems like a mild task compared to the challenge of reducing the human impact on the landscape around communities like Sedona, Arizona. With over a million visitors each year, the national forest is hammered...trampled ground too compact to grow plants; trees and shrubs stripped of lower limbs for an evening's fire; long stagnant lines of carbon-monoxide belching automobiles crawling through parking lots waiting to expunge the next wave of impact. Not a problem I know how to solve, certainly one that will take a community approach.

The problem I can help solve is getting the little horse out of the water tank. Holly and Allison from the stable return with Rose and together the four of us gather boards and bricks. Holly volunteers to get in the water with the horse, and my own spastic fall into the tank adds another cold, wet volunteer stacking bricks and boards underwater. The young horse is quick to use the newly constructed step, and pulls himself out of the tank before the reinforcements of wild horse fans arrive. I learn later that other neighbors helped guide the little guy back to his herd. The rescue is truly a community effort.

The lessons of the little horse linger in my thoughts. Like my Apache friends, many of us in my own community admire and revere the wild inspiration of living among free-roaming horses. Like the creeks of Sedona, open water provides an irresistible lure and becomes a focal point to contemplate the impacts of overpopulation. In this contemplation, I realize only community and communication can guide us to solutions, and to be rescued, we each have to do our own part.

