

Eldorado Mtn.

10/1/92



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

LAKE MEAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

601 NEVADA HIGHWAY

BOULDER CITY, NEVADA 89005

IN REPLY REFER TO:

L76 (LAME-RM)
x N1615

October 1, 1992

Dear Interested Parties:

Enclosed is a copy of the Draft Environmental Assessment for the Removal Plan for Eldorado Mountain Burros in Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Comments will be accepted until October 30, 1992. If there are any questions, please contact Ross Haley, Resource Management Specialist, at (702)293-8950.

Sincerely,

for Gary E. Dunning
Alan O'Neill
Superintendent

Enclosure

DRAFT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OF
REMOVAL PLAN FOR
ELDORADO MOUNTAIN BURROS
IN
LAKE MEAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Prepared by
Lake Mead National Recreation Area
National Park Service
United States Department of the Interior

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) at Lake Mead National Recreation Area (Lake Mead NRA) proposes to remove expanding burro populations in the Eldorado Mountains, Nevada. Burros have utilized portions of the Eldorado Mountains for many years. Burro populations now, however, are increasing and spreading into previously uninhabited and unimpacted areas. These burros are damaging sensitive vegetation areas of the Eldorado Mountains.

The two proposed areas from which burros will be captured and removed are located approximately 12 miles south of Boulder City, Nevada, and 3.5 miles south of Cottonwood Cove, Nevada, adjacent to Lake Mohave in Lake Mead NRA (See maps in Appendix A). The proposed action is consistent with NPS Management Policies and Lake Mead NRA management goals.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the proposed action is to capture and remove expanding burro populations from the Eldorado Mountain area of Lake Mead NRA.

The removal of expanding burro populations is necessary to maintain a healthy vegetative community, to prevent range expansion by burros and prevent deterioration of the range conditions caused by an unmanaged population of burros in and around the Eldorado Mountains.

RELATIONSHIP TO PLANNING

The proposed action is in conformance with NPS Guideline 77, Natural Resource Management Plan, the Lake Mead NRA Five Year Strategic Plan, and the 1991 Draft Resource Management Plan for Lake Mead NRA.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to capture and remove burro populations that are expanding into previously uninhabited areas of the Eldorado Mountains in Lake Mead NRA. It is estimated that approximately 30 burros are expanding into the Burro Wash area and areas south of Cottonwood Cove, Nevada.

The burros will be removed using traditional live-capture techniques. The majority of the animals will probably be captured by using a helicopter to herd them into a wing trap. The secondary method will be to herd the animals with a helicopter into a preselected capture

site to be roped by wranglers. Another possible method will be to use helicopters in a net-gunning operation. The capture is expected to take place in October or November of 1992.

Captures will occur at areas where the greatest number of burros are located at the time. It is not feasible to say where the wing trap or roping locations will be until pre-capture surveys have been conducted. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Lake Mead NRA personnel will go out and locate the burros and then establish a trap location as close as possible to the burros. Typically, capture sites are accessible by road and are located in washes or along existing trails adjacent to roads. If capture sites are not accessible by road, trap sites will be located in washes along the shore of Lake Mohave in areas accessible by boat.

Wing traps are constructed from portable pipe panels with wings of burlap hung on fence posts leading away from the corrals. After completion of a trapping event, all materials are removed. In roping and net-gunning efforts, no materials are installed.

When herding burros with a helicopter, only experienced, certified (Contractor's Federal Aviation Certificates) pilots will be utilized with a helicopter capable of flying the mission. Wranglers experienced in handling burros will be used to herd and handle the animals. The burros will be herded and handled in a careful and efficient manner. Hazards such as cliffs, fences, and mine shafts will be scouted in advance and avoided. Existing trails, roads and washes will be used whenever possible. Burros will be allowed to choose their own route to a capture site and will not be pushed to the extent that mothers will abandon their foals or animals will injure themselves. The captured burros will be transported daily by stock trailers to the holding facility in Kingman, Arizona.

APPLICABLE STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

These standard operating procedures are part of the proposed action.

Handling of burros will be kept to a minimum. Capture and transportation can be stressful to the animals. Minimizing the handling will increase the safety of the burros, as well as the handlers.

Burro foaling season occurs year round at Lake Mead NRA based on monitoring and capture data. No time of the year for capture activities is indicated by the available information to escape having to capture young foals.

Burros will not be run more than 4 miles nor faster than 15 miles per hour (mph) by a helicopter while herding them toward a capture site. Most burros will travel at a canter or trot and will be allowed to do so. If burros are tired, stressed or cautious, they will walk or stop to observe. They will be allowed to do this; however, the burro will not be allowed to stop for a long period of time, as they may attempt to go away from the trap. Herding will begin at first daylight and

if temperatures climb to above 110 degrees, herding will be stopped. Normally, capture operations cease by 1 p.m. before the maximum heat of the day occurs.

A veterinarian will be on call during capture and removal operations.

Trap sites or holding corrals will not be placed in areas occupied by any known listed or proposed threatened or endangered plant or animal species or in any area having known historical or prehistoric significance.

The helicopter will be used with caution. A qualified BLM representative hereby designated as the Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) will be present during capture attempts to ensure strict compliance with the above mileage limitations and Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (43 CFR) Part 4700 regulations. The COR will make careful determination of the boundary line to serve as an outer limit within which attempts will be made to herd burros to a given trap. Topography, distance, weather and current physical conditions of the burros will be considered in setting the mileage limits to avoid undue stress on the burros while they are being herded. The COR will be present at the capture site to ensure minimum injury or other traumatic effects to the burros.

Captured burros that are obviously lame or sick and cannot be transported to the holding facility in Kingman without causing undue pain or suffering to the animals will be disposed of at the capture site. All other animals including old, lame and deformed burros will be transported to Kingman where a veterinarian will make the final decision as to the extent of an animals suffering and prognosis for recovery before making the determination if an animal's life needs to be terminated. If animals are to be put down, it will be done as humanely as possible.

Every effort will be made to keep jennies and their foals together. If trailer space is limited, in order to keep the foals from being kicked or stepped on by other burros, the foals will be hauled separately and then reunited with their mothers upon arrival at the Kingman holding facility. The trip to town will last less than 4 hours, and no problem of reuniting mothers with foals has been experienced in past captures. If needed, a mother and foal may have to be isolated from other burros until they bond.

Temporary traps and corrals will be removed, and sites will be left clean of all debris following the completion of the capture and removal operation.

In addition to the standard operating procedures, the stipulations and specifications as listed in the capture and removal plan for the Eldorado Mountains will also be considered part of the proposed action.

All trap locations and herding operations within Lake Mead NRA will be done in coordination and cooperation with Ross Haley, Resources Management Specialist, Lake Mead NRA to ensure adherence to applicable NPS policy, regulation and law.

ALTERNATIVES

Different methods of capturing burros have been discussed in the proposed actions and will be utilized when the situation allows their use. There are other capture methods that are available.

Alternative I - Water Trapping Burros

Water trapping burros, or setting a trap around their water source, though easier on the animals, is not feasible due to the availability of water and easy access to Lake Mohave. Therefore, this alternative will not be considered further.

Alternative II - Bait Trapping Burros

Bait trapping entails establishing traps and providing food within it to lure animals into the traps. Bait trapping will not be employed along Lake Mohave because of the amount of time that is required habituate burros to bait and the trap site.

Alternative III - Trapping Burros by Herding Them on Horseback

Trapping burros by herding them on horseback is not feasible because it is too easy to lose the burros after starting them towards the trap. Injuries to people, domestic horses and burros are more likely. The cost factor shown from previous roundups using this method indicates that the costs are prohibitive. Therefore, this alternative will not be considered further.

Alternative IV - No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no capture and removal operations would be conducted and no burros would be captured. The burro population would be allowed to continue to increase beyond areas previously designated as Herd Management Areas by the BLM. Utilization of forage would escalate, and several plant species could be eliminated. Environmental degradation would continually worsen. Soil erosion would increase, thus decreasing vegetation cover and diversity in the area. Less vegetation leads to decreased forage availability for a number of native wildlife species. The no-action alternative does not comply with NPS management policies and guidelines.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A description of the affected environment can be found in the Draft Lake Mead NRA Resource Management Plan, which is on file at the Resource Management Office at Lake Mead NRA Headquarters at Boulder City, Nevada. Certain elements of the affected environment, which are necessary to understand the anticipated impacts, will be described in the environmental impacts section of the proposed action.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND THE NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

There would be no adverse impacts from the proposed action to threatened or endangered species (plants or animals); floodplains; wetlands; areas of critical environmental concern; wild and scenic rivers; visual resource management; or cultural, paleontological, and historical resource values. There would be benefits from the proposed action to threatened or endangered species, riparian areas and resource conditions.

The No Action Alternative would have adverse impacts on threatened and endangered plants and their habitats, riparian habitat along the lake, native wildlife and range conditions.

Impacts of Water Trapping, Bait Trapping, and Horseback Herding

Because these alternatives are not technically feasible and would not address the resource management concerns, discussion of their impacts will not be completed.

Threatened and Endangered Plants

There are no known threatened or endangered plants in the area slated for burro population reductions. There may be populations of Category 2 Candidate Penstemon bicolor in the area. If a plant is found that may possibly be a rare or candidate species, a NPS resource management specialist will be contacted, and that area will be avoided in the removal operation.

Under the no action alternative, burros would continue to impact the area and may possibly affect unknown populations of rare or endangered species.

Threatened and Endangered Animals

There are a number of known endangered and sensitive species at Lake Mead NRA (Appendix B). The peregrine falcon (Falco peregrinus) possibly inhabits cliff areas in the Black Canyon, near Burro Wash. Care will be taken when flying a helicopter in habitat suitable for peregrine falcons to avoid any falcons encountered.

The desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizii) is known to live in the capture areas south of Cottonwood Cove. The approximately 1 acre of temporary corrals will be inspected by the COR and NPS biologist prior to set up and will be located only in areas with no active tortoises or tortoise sign. A removal of burros in the area will benefit the desert tortoise through increase in forage and cover availability.

Other species which may occur in the capture areas are nocturnal, or active only at night, and since capture operations will be conducted only during daylight hours, there should be no contact with these species.

There are no identified mitigation measures for the desert tortoise and its habitat under the no action alternative.

Water and Riparian

Most of the shore and the washes adjacent to Lake Mohave within the removal area show moderate to heavy use by burros. Reduced burro population levels would lessen grazing and trampling in these areas, contributing to more favorable riparian habitat.

The no action alternative would allow heavy to severe grazing and trampling of riparian habitat to continue and expand along the lake and may cause irreparable environmental damage to the native plant community.

Social and Economic Values

The removal of burros from the capture area would decrease the concentration of burro droppings and trampling along the shoreline, enhancing the recreational use. Since this capture and removal is a continuation of previous ongoing management, no change in economic benefits to the community is expected to occur.

Air Quality

Short-term increases in transient dust levels caused by operation of ground vehicles and running burros would occur. If there is a high level of dust present in the capture area, the area will be watered down. Short-term localized impacts to air quality would also occur during capture operations and handling of burros resulting from helicopter and vehicular exhaust fumes. The cumulative long-term benefit would be that increased vegetative ground cover would maintain or reduce the amount of wind borne particulates generated from the removal area.

Burros

The two capture and removal areas under the proposed action are located approximately 12 miles south of Boulder City, Nevada, and approximately 3 miles south of Cottonwood Cove, Nevada, in Lake Mead National Recreation Area. The burros in this area have moved out of the BLM designated Eldorado Herd Management Area. The burros are expanding their range into sensitive, previously undisturbed areas.

A negative impact on burros would be expected during the capture. This would result from the stressful effects of capturing, handling, loading and hauling the animals.

Burros do not form strong band bonds. The strongest bond is the jenny/foal bond. The second strongest is the bond between the jenny and the previous year's foal. There may be stress associated with splitting of bands, but it is not considered traumatic. The chance of a jenny abandoning her foal is very low. Orphan foals created by capture operations are considered rare.

Few burros are injured in the removal operations. Injuries, such as burros running into the trap or being kicked by another burro may occur when the animal is roped or is in the trap. Death loss at the capture site is expected to be 1 percent though every effort is made to prevent this. The standard operating procedures will minimize negative impacts from the capture, and ensure humane treatment and safe handling of the burros during capture, care and transportation to the BLM preparation facility.

Enough burros will remain in the adjacent BLM designated Herd Management Area to maintain viable herds and provide for interaction between burros. The greatest competition for forage, water, cover and living space is intraspecies competition. A reduced burro population would reduce competition between the remaining burros, and other wildlife such as desert bighorn sheep and desert tortoise. This reduced competition would result in a less stressful environment for the remaining wildlife.

Under the no action alternative, the heavy-to severe-use levels would reduce the quality and quantity of forage for the burros. The results would be reduced animal vigor and reduced survival rate for foals due to habitat deterioration. There are no practical ways to mitigate these impacts under the no action alternative.

Soils

Areas that presently exhibit soil erosion above that of a normal desert ecosystem would be positively impacted because of the reduction of animals and decreased trampling effects. New trampling areas and resultant soil compaction would be created at the trap and holding corral sites as a result of the proposed action. Since capture sites will be limited to dry wash bottoms that exhibit a sandy gravel texture, long lasting effects will be minimal, and all signs of the capture operation will be eliminated the first time the wash runs with water.

Vegetative cover has a direct influence on the wind and water erosion potential of soils. The reduction in burro numbers under the proposed action and the resultant reduction in vegetation utilization would increase plant cover and lessen the amount of soil lost to erosion.

The no action alternative would cause the heavy to severe use levels to continue in the area. Soil erosion would be expected to increase due to the reduced vegetative cover and trailing in these areas. There are no ways to mitigate these impacts under this alternative.

Vegetation

Under the proposed action, removal of burros will help prevent further deterioration of the range due to expansion of burro numbers. By removing these burros, there would be positive, long-term impacts to the vegetative community of the area. The ecological condition of the different plant communities would begin to improve after the capture and removal. Production of individual species would increase, and more desirable herbaceous species would be able to revegetate to increase their percentage of composition within the community.

There would be a short-term negative impact to the vegetation at the trap sites and holding corrals, an area of approximately 1 acre each. The vegetation would be severely trampled by all the burros that would be concentrated at those locations. This would be a minor impact, because the impacted areas would be small in relation to the capture area and would usually be located in active desert washes. Vegetative regeneration would be expected within 2 to 3-years, depending upon climatic conditions.

Under the no action alternative, the ecological status of the area would continue to deteriorate. Productivity of desirable herbaceous species would continue to decline, along with other vegetative species. There are no ways to mitigate these impacts under this alternative.

Wildlife

A minor impact to wildlife is expected during the capture and removal operation. Helicopters have been observed to produce negative impacts on wildlife species, such as running and panic behavior in bighorn sheep, flight response in waterfowl and frantic escape behavior in eagles and other raptors. Although the precise overall impacts of low-flying aircraft on wildlife are not known at the present time, caution will be exercised in using helicopters to minimize the impacts.

Under the proposed action, management of burro populations should reduce competition for forage and result in a beneficial impact to the bighorn sheep, the desert tortoise and

other mammal, reptile and avian populations. Reduced use on the shores of Lake Mead should benefit a large number of wildlife species which utilize riparian vegetation for nesting, resting and foraging.

Under the no action alternative, heavy to severe use levels would continue to occur resulting in possible direct competition with other animals using the habitat. The reduced cover caused by excessive grazing may reduce potential shade available to small mammal, reptile and avian species dependent on shade during the hot times of the year. There are no practical ways to mitigate these impacts under the no action alternative.

Livestock Grazing

There currently are no licensed domestic livestock grazing throughout the capture area, so capture activities will have no impact on domestic livestock.

Cultural Resources

The evaluation of cultural resources will be done in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. If any evidence of cultural resources is found during the operation, a cultural resource specialist will immediately be called in for evaluation.

ADVERSE IMPACTS THAT COULD NOT BE AVOIDED

Burros not caught in this operation may continue to impact the area. Some localized degradation of vegetative resources would be expected to occur.

In spite of mitigating measures and careful and professional handling of burros during the capture, there may be up to 1 percent of the burros injured or killed.

Short-term, localized impacts to air quality would occur during capture and removal operations and handling of burros resulting from helicopter and vehicular exhaust fumes. Short-term increases in transient dust would occur due to vehicular traffic and burro movement.

IMPACT/MITIGATION MATRIX

PARK: Lake Mead NRA PROJECT: Eldorado Burro Removal

IMPACT

1. Bighorn sheep may be stressed during the removal operation.
2. Trampling and soil compaction will take place within the traps and corrals. Burros may experience stress at trap sites and in the holding corrals.
3. Vehicular traffic may cause damage to undisturbed areas.
4. Project is in close proximity to desert tortoise habitat.
5. The peregrine falcon possibly inhabits cliff areas near the capture site.
6. Short-term increases in transient dust levels may occur.

PRESCRIBED MITIGATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

1. Whenever possible, a Lake Mead NRA resource specialist and the COR of the operation will avoid areas of bighorn sheep to avoid stressing these animals.
2. The COR will not keep burros within the traps or corrals for more than one day to minimize stress to the animals, trampling effects and soil compaction.
3. The COR will ensure that vehicular traffic will be restricted to existing roads and washes. Traps will be constructed where access is possible by vehicles. Any areas where roads or washes do not provide access to a trap site, boats will be used for access.
4. Capture sites will not be placed in active desert tortoise areas. Tortoise surveys will be accomplished by the COR and a Lake Mead NRA resource specialist prior to establishing trap and corral areas.
5. The COR and a Lake Mead NRA resource specialist will ensure that the helicopter avoids habitat suitable for peregrine falcons and any falcons encountered.
6. Areas will be watered down if necessary. Responsible individual is the COR.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Past burro capture and removal plans for Lake Mead NRA have been completed by the BLM, Las Vegas District and Kingman Resource Area. This Draft Environmental Assessment for Removal Plan for Eldorado Mountain Burros in Lake Mead NRA was accomplished by Lake Mead NRA personnel with close coordination from the Las Vegas District and Kingman Resource Area BLM offices. Agencies and individuals consulted for the preparation and review of this environmental assessment include:

Bureau of Land Management, Las Vegas District
Bureau of Land Management, Kingman Resource Area
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Nevada Department of Wildlife

NPS, Lake Mead NRA Planning Team

Kent Turner, Chief of Natural Resource Management
Ross Haley, Resource Management Specialist
Bill Burke, Resource Management Specialist
Jim Holland, Park Planner
Kay Rohde, Chief of Interpretation
Karen Whitney, Public Information Officer
Nancy Yoder, Park Ranger