BEHIND THE SCENES AT

CHINCOTEAGUE

The Death Toll Rises

T

here were about 40 to 50 horses in the pen. They all looked very stressed,” recalled Jan Spink, a therapeutic riding instructor from central Virginia. Ms. Spink was on her way to the beach when she stopped to observe pony-handling procedures during Chincoteague’s annual pony penning round up. “Then I noticed that I mare was down,” she continued. “She wasn’t looking right.”

“I went to the firemen (who sponsor the roundup); there were about a dozen of them standing around. None of them had noticed the pony, so I pointed her out and said that she was in severe distress and needed a vet immediately.”

“I watched for about ten minutes, assuming the fire company had a competent system in place for veterinary emergencies. I assumed that everybody was running to get things for the mare. I assumed wrong. Nobody seemed to be doing anything to help her and valuable time was being wasted.”

“I finally said, ‘You’ve got to get a vet!’ They said, ‘We tried. No vet will come.’”

The next thing Jan Spink knew was that fire company officials were bringing a resident veterinarian to the corral site. “Outside of myself, she was the only person with any knowledge of horses,” Ms. Spink explained. “Even she was standing there in confusion, telling the crowd the pony was about to give birth. The pony wasn’t even pregnant. ‘Meanwhile, the pony was overheating in the direct sunlight, and nobody was doing anything. That’s when I finally jumped the fence.’”

Ms. Spink began directing efforts to save the dying animal. “I was about to cry,” she said. “I told the firemen to give her ice water, to give her something.”

“Then I noticed that the dying animal was in 102 degree heat in the back of the horse trailer. Not surprisingly, these efforts were as futile as they were heroic. Adequate veterinary care came too late for that pony, just as it did for another 5 mares that were killed in the last two years—the victims of Chincoteague’s famous pony penning.

Fire Company $500, Pones $0

Each year, during the last week in July, the tiny island town of Chincoteague, Virginia, is thrust into the national spotlight as tens of thousands of spectators converge to participate in pony-penning events. Scores of newborn foals, mistakenly thought to be descended from ponies swept overboard from a Spanish ship 150 years ago, are auctioned to bidders in a time-honored tradition that dates back sixty-four years.

Asstechuate Island, a thirty-seven-mile spit off the Maryland/Virginia shore, is the home to roughly 300 ponies—animals that have made the successful transition to life in a marine environment. These hardy horses live in an exclusive habitat, enduring everything from temperature extremes to heavy mosquito and tick infestations. Consuming a variety of grasses in Asstechuate’s marshlands, the ponies manage to flush the excess salt from their systems by drinking the fresh water they find in rain puddles and springs.

A herd of about 150 ponies inhabits the Virginia lower third of Asstechuate Island, living quietly in the salt marshes of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Although they are described as “wild,” these 150 ponies are actually owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company. Each year, that organization pays $5800 to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and is granted a special-use permit to graze its ponies on the federal refuge. As long as the ponies do not pose a threat to the island’s unique ecology, the FWS tolerates their presence and enjoys the added attraction they represent to refuge visitors.

In what is billed as a management tool necessary to thin the Chincoteague herd, each year, the fire company sells off most of the herd’s newborn foals, a tradition that, twenty years ago, brought the fire company a few thousand dollars, but, today, has become a much more lucrative event. This year, with a total of 77 foals selling for an average of $600 a piece, pony penning added a whopping $40,000 to the firemen’s coffers. Despite the record take, most of the monies raised during pony penning come not from the sale of ponies but rather from the booming tourist trade that accompanies the event.

Pony penning gets underway Sunday, as firemen on horseback begin to round up and corral the refuge’s ponies, separating the stallions from mares and foals. On Wednesday, when crowds of spectators lining the beaches, mares and foals are forced to swim across a channel separating Assateague Island and the refuge from the seaside town of Chincoteague. Once they reach the opposite bank, the ponies are given a short rest, then herded down Main Street to Chincoteague’s carnival grounds. Thursday morning, foals are taken from their mothers and auctioned off to spectators; fool-less mares make the swim back to freedom on Friday.

It’s not only the festivities associated with pony penning, but also the complaints The HSUS receives each year that have become part of the annual tradition. For more than two decades, HSUS investigators have monitored the pony penning activities, witnessing a multitude of abuses ranging from the sale of day-old foals and the manhandling of newborns to the shipment of newly purchased ponies—their legs tied tightly together—in the backseats of Volkswagons and jorges. “Wild pony rides,” in which mares, just separated from their foals, are forced to endure brute riding by local cowboys, are also part of the show.

While negotiations with the fire company have resulted in some improvements (company officials no longer sell day-old foals, transportation standards have been upgraded, and sale packages are distributed to buyers), problems continue to plague the operation, the result of the expedient and highly stressful fashion in which the herd is handled and managed. Impulse buying by spectators with no knowledge of the specialized care required is common.

1988: Four Mares Collapse

Last summer, a new threat to resident ponies surfaced when, shortly after rounding, 200 mares and foals became gravely ill and lapsed into shock. It would be weeks before autopsies revealed that the ponies had consumed island vegetation toxic to their systems, vegetation that would ultimately cause cyanide poisoning in the mares.

Although the pony deaths were kept under wraps by the fire company, information about the tragedy was leaked to The HSUS by an anonymous phone caller. Part of the outrage during pony penning revealed that 4 mares had died, and,
pany made no attempt to obtain the services of a veterinarian. The HSUS found, in the past, that many such services are purchased on impulse by people inexperienced in caring for wild horses.

When the first 2 ponies collapsed, no veterinarian was present, and the fire company made no attempt to obtain the services of one. "The horses' jaws became locked, they couldn't stand up, and they were burning up," recalled a former FWS employee. "I phoned the fire company's veterinarian at his office but he told me he was tied up in surgery and couldn't come." The FWS employee spent four long hours on the phone trying to locate a veterinarian who would come to examine 2 more mares that had gone down in the interim. By the time she located one, rescue efforts were futile; all 4 animals eventually died what were described as very painful deaths. (The legless pony, who later performed autopsies on 2 of the mares explained that, in the wild, the ponies would not have eaten the toxic vegetation, consuming primarily island grasses. When forced into the extremely unnatural conditions of a corral, however, they apparently did so, with fatal consequences.)

The HSUS finds it inconceivable that the FWS was left to bear the responsibility of locating a veterinarian for the ponies in a time of dire need, when corralled mares were mysteriously dying and no veterinarian was available to examine the herd," said HSUS Investigator Gail Eisnitz in a letter to the FWS last year. "The fact that a FWS employee spent four hours on the telephone every time a mare died, a locate clinical assistance is a clear indication of the fire company's indifference to the welfare of its wild horses.

Additional investigation by The HSUS revealed that the fire company has no significant mechanism in place to monitor or care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR year-round. In fact, a biologist who conducted extensive research on the refuge informed The HSUS that, in the past, when injured or ill animals were brought to the fire company's attention, they were simply drugged from public view and left to die. There have also been allegations of kickings and drownings of disabled horses as well.

As a result of last year's deaths, The HSUS requested that the FWS include a special provision in the fire company's grazing permit requiring that an on-site licensed veterinarian be present during the entire pony-penning operation. Last November, we received word from the FWS that our request had been approved and a special condition had been inserted into the fire company's permit. It was a small step, but we were delighted to know that, after sixty-three years, the fire company would at last receive a locate veterinary assistance. It is obviously that the husbandry and level of care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR is inadequate, and that the fire company's negligence is a threat to the welfare of its own ponies, even if only during pony-panning week.

1989: Two Mares Die

On the morning of July 27, 1989, one year to the day after the first two mares died, Jan Spink tried to save 1 of 2 mares that would die this year. Despite the 1988 tragedy, despite the stipulation in its grazing permit, the fire company again had not arranged to have a veterinarian on-site, nor could company officials locate one anywhere.

"After last year's deaths, we find it inconceivable that the fire company did not take any measures to have a veterinarian present at [July's] events," explained HSUS President John A. Hoyt in a recent letter to Chincoteague NWR Manager John Schroer. "Despite every indication that the FWS was aware of the animal welfare problems on the refuge, the fire company did not make any strenuous effort to provide veterinary care. It is obvious that the husbandry and level of care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR is inadequate, and that the fire company's negligence is a threat to the welfare of its own ponies, even if only during pony-panning week.

WHAT'S A CHINCOTEAGUE PONY?

No one really knows where Chincoteague ponies came from or how they came to dwell on Assateague Island. We like to believe that the ancestors of the ponies actually descend from stock of early colonists who permitted their Spanish barb stock to descend from the survivors of a sixteenth-century shipwreck, some scientists believe that the legend has it that they were descended from stock of early colonists who permitted their animals to roam freely about the island. Whatever their origin, one fact remains: Chincoteague ponies are not the purebreeds— with bloodlines dating back 350 years—that the public has been led to believe. In fact, time and again, off-island blood has been introduced to the herd.

The HSUS found that, despite the buyers' best intentions, Chincoteague ponies imported to other 2000, were simply drugged from public view and left to die. There have also been allegations of kickings and drownings of disabled horses as well.

As a result of last year's deaths, The HSUS requested that the FWS include a special provision in the fire company's grazing permit requiring that an on-site licensed veterinarian be present during the entire pony-panning operation. Last November, we received word from the FWS that our request had been approved and a special condition had been inserted into the fire company's permit. It was a small step, but we were delighted to know that, after sixty-three years, the fire company would at last receive a locate veterinary assistance. It is obvious that the husbandry and level of care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR is inadequate, and that the fire company's negligence is a threat to the welfare of its own ponies, even if only during pony-panning week.

1989: Two Mares Die

On the morning of July 27, 1989, one year to the day after the first two mares died, Jan Spink tried to save 1 of 2 mares that would die this year. Despite the 1988 tragedy, despite the stipulation in its grazing permit, the fire company again had not arranged to have a veterinarian on-site, nor could company officials locate one anywhere.

"After last year's deaths, we find it inconceivable that the fire company did not take any measures to have a veterinarian present at [July's] events," explained HSUS President John A. Hoyt in a recent letter to Chincoteague NWR Manager John Schroer. "Despite every indication that the FWS was aware of the animal welfare problems on the refuge, the fire company did not make any strenuous effort to provide veterinary care. It is obvious that the husbandry and level of care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR is inadequate, and that the fire company's negligence is a threat to the welfare of its own ponies, even if only during pony-panning week.

WHAT'S A CHINCOTEAGUE PONY?

No one really knows where Chincoteague ponies came from or how they came to dwell on Assateague Island. We like to believe that the ancestors of the ponies actually descend from stock of early colonists who permitted their animals to roam freely about the island. Whatever their origin, one fact remains: Chincoteague ponies are not the purebreeds— with bloodlines dating back 350 years—that the public has been led to believe. In fact, time and again, off-island blood has been introduced to the herd.

Reports from the early 1900s tell us that Shetland ponies were imported to the island and subsequently bred with resident stock. As recently as 1982, when half the herd was swept to sea in a devastating storm, outside stock was introduced to replace the herd. In recent years, new stud animals—particularly mustangs, Spanish barbs, and Arabians—have been imported by the fire company to upgrade the herd and add new blood. (Why does the fire company think it necessary to import new stock?"

each year, scores of unsuspecting buyers shell out hundreds of dollars for so-called Chincoteague ponies. Such foals are often in extremely poor condition at the time of sale. "I saw the foal two weeks ago that was brought back from the island," recalled a former buyer subjected to transparent deception. "It was the same foal that The HSUS described as the dejected gelding of a two-month-old foal that was anemic, emaciated, and dehydrated. The HSUS brought the foal back to Washington, DC for further examination. The FWS has decided not to impose any penalties on the fire company; the company's permit will not be revoked or suspended nor will fire officials be fined for their flagrant violation of their special-use permit. For this reason, we urge our members to write the Interior Department's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, with a copy to Chincoteague NWR Manager John Schroer, demanding that the FWS take strong disciplinary action against the fire company for its obvious negligence in the past and for its failure to ensure that its special-use permit is being enforced. Thank you for your help in facilitating the care of these ancient ponies."

The Honorable Constance B. Harris, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, Department of the Interior, 18th and C Streets, NW, Washington, DC 20240 and Mr. John Schroer, Refuge Manager, Chincoteague NWR, PO Box 62, Chincoteague, VA 23336.