Although they evolved in America, horses are not considered a native species. They disappeared mysteriously just after humans appeared in this hemisphere, about 8000 years ago. It wasn't until Spanish conquistadors brought horses with them to America in the sixteenth century that they returned. This evolutionary interruption caused wild horses to be classified as a feral species, not indigenous to the United States and, therefore, not protected by laws designed to protect “native” wildlife. Lacking protection, wild horses almost disappeared.

In the mid-nineteenth century, millions of wild horses roamed the plains; by 1867, only 9,500 remained. Wild horses were thought to compete with livestock for forage on public lands and were blamed for rampant destruction of the range. Ranchers began to capture and slaughter of wild horses. Passage of the Wild, Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971 was expected to stop these abuses.

Administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Act prohibited:

- removal of wild horses or burros from public land without authority;
- acquisition of wild horses or burros by private individuals without government permission;
- malicious death or harassment of wild horses or burros;
- processing or permitting the processing of an animal or its remains into commercial products;
- sale of an animal or its remains; and,

violation of regulations issued to carry out the Act.

The Act stated that horses deemed “excess” would be rounded up and either relocated to another wild horse area, destroyed humanely, or placed in private custody. But, “excess” was not defined—a critical omission that continues to haunt wild horses today, as the courts have generally given the BLM discretion in management decisions involving wild horses and burros. The BLM considers “excess” those horses that, according to its calculations, exceed the resources of the land on which they live. The HSUS and other wild-horse protection groups have traditionally questioned determinations of “excess” because the BLM has never provided concrete data to uphold these determinations. Wild horse lands historically have been mismanaged and their resources abused. Therefore, wild-horse protection groups reject the BLM’s determination of “excess” and continue to believe that these animals deserve to live on their traditional lands.

Unfortunately, early on, the BLM showed itself a poor guardian for the wild horses. In 1973, with BLM approval, Idaho ranchers rounded up twenty horses with snowmobiles and air-craft. About half of the horses were run over cliffs to their deaths, according to HSUS North Central Regional Director Frantz Dantzler’s eyewitness account. This event prompted lawsuits against the U. S. Department of Interior regarding illegal roundups. An injunction against roundups in Challis, Idaho, was obtained.

Wild horses are victims of BLM decision-making and attitudes. Inset: One of almost 100 wild horses in North Dakota that died in 1988 following their adoption.
In 1972, the U.S. Department of the Interior, through the BLM, began a program to remove excess wild horses and burros from federal lands to protect wild landholders and their livestock. Over the years, the BLM has expanded this program to include wild horses on private land and nonfederal lands, and the program is now referred to as the Wild Horse and Burro Program. The program has been controversial from its inception, and there is ongoing debate about its effectiveness and the best way to manage wild horses and burros on federal lands.

The BLM is responsible for managing wild horses and burros on federal lands, which includes public lands and lands administered by the BLM. Wild horses and burros are a non-native species that were introduced to the United States by Spanish settlers in the 16th century. The BLM manages wild horses and burros to ensure that they do not pose a threat to livestock or other wildlife, and to protect their natural habitat.

The BLM manages wild horses and burros through a variety of methods, including roundups, where horses are captured and transported to holding facilities, and adoption programs, where horses are released into the wild and monitored to determine their survival rates. The BLM also works with private organizations, such as the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act of 1971, which established the BLM as the lead agency for managing wild horses and burros on federal lands.

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