Delicate balance in HORSE NATION - Native Americans divided on horse slaughter

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Author: *Leslie Linthicum*
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Five of the plaintiffs who sued in federal court to bar commercial **horse slaughter** in the United States are Native American, and they cited their peoples' spiritual ties with the **Horse** Nation as the reason for their opposition to **horse** meat processing plants.

According to the lawsuit, Sandy Schaefer, a Sioux who lives in Roswell, "believes that to **slaughter** a **horse** is greedy, disrespectful, and contrary to the Native Americans' relationship with its brother nation, the **horse** nation. It is not an answer for any tribe and will only bring devastation to the Native American people and culture."

Another plaintiff, Tanya Littlewolf, a Mescalero Apache, believes slaughtering horses "will bring harm, betrayal, and destruction to all Native Americans." Arvol Looking **Horse** , a Dakota-Lakota-Nakota elder, tells of how horses have nurtured and sacrificed for Indian people. David Bald Eagle, chief of the Minikoju Band of the Cheyenne River Lakota, "believes that abusing a **horse** , including slaughtering a **horse** for human consumption, will bring misfortune or death to the abuser."

Roxanne Talltree-Douglas, another of the Native American lawsuit plaintiffs, recounts the Blackfoot belief that "horses are spirit beings that were put on Mother Earth to teach us how to live, love, and exist and that hitting or hurting a **horse** is the same as spitting in the face of the Creator."

While those Native American plaintiffs speak of horses as spirit beings and warn of tragic consequences if they are mistreated, the Yakama Nation of Washington is on the other side of the case, arguing that feral horses are destroying its reservation and that **horse slaughter** is its best option to reducing its herd and saving its land.

Also weighing in on the side of **horse slaughter** was the largest organization of tribal governments, the National Congress of American Indians, and the tribe with the largest reservation in the country, the Navajo Nation.

Navajo President Ben Shelly, in a letter to Congress, outlined the damage done to reservation rangeland by tens of thousands of feral horses.

"Lifting the **horse slaughter** ban would allow the Navajo Nation to humanely address the feral **horse** problem and preserve our natural resources," Shelly wrote.

In its letter to Congress in support of reopening **horse slaughter** facilities in the U.S., the National Congress of American Indians wrote, "These facilities represent a viable and humane method of assisting tribes and other entities in this country to stop the detrimental impact the tens of thousands of feral horses have on our lands."

Arguing for **horse slaughter** while acknowledging the sacred nature of the **horse** in tribal culture is a tricky maneuver for tribes. As the heartfelt sentiments of the tribal members trying to stop **horse slaughter** suggest, the **horse** has been a powerful ally and holds an important place in their cultural and spiritual lives. It is considered as much an equal, a brother, as a mode of transportation or a meal, although a recent story in the Navajo Times discussed how Navajos traditionally ate**horse** meat to supplement diets in the winter months and to ward off colds and flu.

In Navajo creation stories, horses first came to the Diné when White Bead Woman turned four **horse** fetishes into living creatures. Like the Navajos, most tribes have stories that explain how horses were given to their people by holy beings.

Western history records the arrival of the **horse** in North America on Christopher Columbus' second voyage. By the early 1600s, waves of Spanish explorers had brought horses and cattle into the New World and began to transform the lives of Native peoples.

Peter Iverson, in his book "When Indians Became Cowboys," explains the profound effect the **horse** had on Native Americans: "In war and peace, they would never be the same. Horses quickly became objects to be stolen, traded for, fought over, dreamed about."

And now, on some reservations, they are sent to **slaughter** when their numbers have multiplied beyond what the land can support.

The Yakama tribe, in its court filing, described a sensitive rangeland overrun by 12,000 feral horses and said a significant number of horses were sold by tribal members for meat processing until recently.

Yakama Chairman Harry Smiskin put it plainly in a letter to the president and secretary of agriculture earlier this year.

"There is a market for **horse** meat in many parts of the world, and if we can create jobs, humanely reduce overpopulated herds and feed others, it is absurd to prohibit it," he wrote.

On the Navajo Nation, the tribe's Agriculture Department has repeatedly rounded up horses and sold the unbranded or unclaimed ones at auction.

Erny Zah, the Navajo Nation spokesman, told me that when **horse** meat plants in the United States shut down, the auction market dropped and prices fell to as little as $10 a **horse** . He said it costs the tribe $70 to $80 to round up the horses, give them a health inspection and transport them to auction.

I asked Zah why the tribe does not dispense with auctions, where they lose money, and put down the horses it rounds up and determines are unbranded — especially since it knows that most of them will be headed for a slaughterhouse, either in Mexico or here if **horse slaughter** plants start up again.

Zah recoiled at the suggestion. "That's not an option. That's just not an option," he said. "They're sacred animals. They have provided for us."

If there is a central principle of Navajo life, it is balance — in health, in nature, in relationships. A terrible drought and multiplying horses has upset that balance, as has the choice between letting animals starve and sending them to **slaughter** .

"There's a delicate balance, and then we've got feral horses that are throwing it out of balance and they're sacred," Zah said. "So we're doing the best thing we know to do, which is rounding them up, even though their destination might not be what we'd like to see."