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Wild horses and the political ecology of nature restoration in the Missouri Ozarks

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Abstract

From 1990 to 1996, the National Park Service and residents living near the Ozark National Scenic Riverways in south-central Missouri clashed over the federal agency's intention to remove 25–30 wild horses from the protected area. The struggle was carried out in various legal and legislative arenas, the media, and in community protests and meetings. The dispute ended only with Congressional approval of the 1996 Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act, which included an amendment ordering an end to any removal efforts.

This article focuses on the contested social constructions of the horses themselves. To government scientists and managers, the animals represented a feral and exotic species with no legitimate place in agency-mandated ecosystem management and restoration scenarios. To many local members of the Missouri Wild Horse League, which contested the removal, the horses had critical historical and cultural importance as icons of regional identity, history and personal experience, and as core symbols of communities increasingly politically and economically marginalized.

Local disputes with environmental groups and agencies concerned with Ozark ecosystem preservation and restoration have become more pronounced and numerous over the past two decades. This article approaches citizen opposition to environmental agendas not as an anti-environmental movement, but as a contemporary effort of marginalized groups to identify sources of economic, political, and social loss, and symbols of local identity and power. The wild horse issue reveals wider structural divides, and thus speaks to the question of which social groups shall have the power to impose their visions of the landscape and political economy.

Keywords: Missouri; Ozarks; Wild horses; Exotic species; Social construction of landscapes; Ecosystem management; National Park Service

1. Introduction

In May of 1990, the National Park Service (NPS) announced its intention to remove small bands totaling around 25 free-roaming horses from the Ozark National Scenic Riverways (ONSR) in south-central Missouri. Immediately following the appearance of a brief NPS press release in the weekly newspaper in Eminence, near the Park's headquarters, community residents began voicing their opposition to the NPS, politicians, and the media. Within six months, local citizens united under the banner of a new group called the Missouri Wild Horse League (MWHL). Resistance by the anti-removal advocates took the form of protests and demonstrations, news releases, a series of litigation challenges, and appeals to state and federal legislators. Legal efforts resulted in a temporary restraining order from a federal judge in St. Louis in late 1990 and a permanent injunction against NPS action from the US District Court in Cape Girardeau in 1992. The Park Service in turn was successful the following year in overturning the injunction before the US Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis (Wilkins et al., 1991, 1992). Although legally entitled to

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remove the horses, the agency refrained from taking any action as it contemplated the potential fallout from heightened media attention and a rising tide of Federal legislative proposals to curb its powers.

After three years of efforts in the US Congress, Bill Emerson (R-MO, 8th District) finally put an end to the conflict with an amendment to the 1996 Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act. Emerson's rule prohibited the NPS from carrying out its 1990 decision and further enjoined the agency to "protect free roaming horses living within the boundaries" of the OSNR and ordered the agency to provide "adequate pastures to accommodate the free-roaming horse herd." (Omnibus Parks, 1996) The Congressman's success thus finished off a conflict that had endured through five years of state and federal legislative attention, four years of legal arguing in federal courts, and six years of oftentimes intense and acrimonious encounters between the NPS and local citizens.

Environmental conflicts are at their heart issues about power to decide everything from the definition of nature to access to natural resources and, as a consequence, to reap whatever tangible and intangible spoils go with such victories. As Congressman Emerson's amendment reveals, the power of who gets to decide who decides is often paramount in a theater where the actors range, as in this case, from the local to the national and where the appropriate public (and not so public) arenas range from pastures along the Current River to committee hearing rooms on Constitution Avenue.

This essay focuses on competing cultural constructs about the object of the conflict—the horses themselves. Specifically, it examines the discourses and narratives of the National Park Service and local residents active in the MWHL to understand how each framed the wild horses in relation to both nature and culture, to examine the meaning that the horses had in terms of preferred landscapes, and to reveal how these meanings reflected the social identities of the actors themselves (Nygren, 1999). [1] These are epistemological issues because they require us to ask about the process through which knowledge is created and evaluated, and how particular understandings of the world relate to organized and specific systems of logic, belief, and authority (Raedeke and Rikoon, 1998).

2. Social constructions of landscapes

Political ecology adherents, as well as most social scientists, assume that environments and landscapes are socially mediated, symbolic constructs whose human significance is determined on the basis of systems of cultural knowledge [2] (Blaikie, 1995, 1996; Escobar, 1998; Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Ward and Minton, 1992). According to this admittedly anthropocentric viewpoint, nature lacks in and of itself a meaning or symbolic subtext other than that provided by human beings. Further, this subtext, which we can consider a type of semiotic system, is in a constant state of flux due to a number of factors, ranging from the changing values that we place on specific environmental characteristics to governmental regulation and management and shifts in other belief systems. This perspective does not deny a nature-in-itself, but rather emphasizes a nature-as-experience, a nature filtered through human optical nerves, our "senses," our expectations, our ideas of the appropriate and of right and wrong. This filtering results in a construction of the "environment" that is best termed as mimetic in the sense that a nature that pleases us does so because it imitates our souls (or gives the comforting illusion of doing so) and a nature that horrifies us similarly reflects our personal, social, and cultural horrors of disruptions in the proper order of things. To understand the environment in this manner thus requires examination of the cultural lenses and metaphors people employ as the foundation of human–nature relationships, a subject formerly embraced only in detail by ecological philosophers and philosophical ecologists.

Researchers from a variety of disciplines have contributed to understanding social constructions of nature and the environment, including the diverse ways in which people perceive, evaluate, and use physical landscapes (Cronon, 1996a,b; Neumann, 1997; Fairhead and Leach, 1994; Haenn, 1999). Increasingly, scholars have employed cultural perspectives on social identities, knowledge systems, and landscapes to aid in understanding and, unfortunately much less frequently, resolving environmental conflicts, which might be best approached as clashes of competing knowledge systems and constructs held among different social groups (Rikoon, 1995). Included among these groups are not only

[1] Documentation of NPS perspectives consisted of 17 interviews with 13 key ONSR personnel, including the two park superintendents during the course of this controversy and eight NPS staff whose reports and testimonies outlined NPS positions. Additional information was derived from NPS employee court testimonies and briefs, news releases and reports from the ONSR, and correspondence between Department of Interior officials and US Representative Bill Emerson. Data on opposition to the horses' removal is derived primarily from six sources: 26 formal interviews with active Missouri Wild Horse League participants, including MWHL officers and key spokespersons; 12 interviews with local residents who were not official members of the MWHL; observation of key local public events, including marches, community meetings, and MWHL meetings; letters-to-the editor and other articles in local newspapers; official testimony and briefs in the two primary legal cases; and, claims articulated in public meetings and events sponsored by the MWHL.

[2] Rather than denoting domains of knowledge, cultural knowledge systems are the non-random ways of understanding, perceiving, and experiencing reality, which includes human relationships both with one another and the natural environment (Banuri and Marglin, 1993).