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Interview with Vickery Eckhoff

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **VICKERY ECKHOFF** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 211.*

JASMIN: Vickery Eckhoff is a US journalist whose investigation of the horse slaughter trade has produced five radio interviews, a book proposal, and 21 articles on forbes.com, the Huffington Post, and Newsweek - The Daily Beast. Her coverage of the media, food safety, political, economic, environmental, and humane aspects of slaughter began in 2011, following her rescue of an ex race horse and a long career promoting financial, technology, and food/wine coverage. As part of her research, Vickery has interviewed Dr. Temple Grandin, local and state legislators, horse meat-loving chefs, prominent veterinarians and science professionals, horse industry insiders, slaughter plant owners, kill buyers, attorneys, horse owners, major animal welfare organizations, and officials at the USDA and other government agencies.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Vickery.

VICKERY: It's nice to be here.

JASMIN: It's so great to have you on the show, and we're just really looking forward to picking your brain a little bit today on the subject of horses.

MARIANN: Yeah, and especially the wild horse issue, which is an issue, I think everybody knows that issue is out there, everybody knows it's really important and it's really dire. But everybody feels like they don't really quite know enough about it. So, I know you know everything about it, Vickery, so we're gonna definitely get the story here. And just to start off, can you tell us what horses you're talking about when you talk about wild horses, where the horses live and how many are there, sort of?

VICKERY: Sure. Well, the horses exist on lands mostly in the western states, in Nevada, Colorado, there are some in Wyoming. The number of them is in dispute. The Bureau of Land Management has estimated them to be, I think at around 35,000. At least that was last time that I was writing about the issue. And wild horse advocates have put those numbers far lower, in the mid-20 range or even below that. There really isn't much agreement between the BLM and wild horse advocates about how many there are. But there are horses and there are also burros, and the horses are descendants of horses brought over by the conquistadors. But of course, horses are native to the Americas, and were here many, many years ago before going extinct. So, those horses do exist, mostly in Nevada.

MARIANN: So, I actually wasn't really aware that some of these horses were actually native to the Americas and then they bred with horses who were brought over from Europe in the far-off days of the conquistadors?

VICKERY: Well, horses arose in North America about six million years ago. The species arose, and they became about 7600 years ago. But there have been a lot of fossils found, some quite recently, proving the origins of the equines in this continent. And this has been very heartening to wild horse advocates because there are certainly many people who want to get rid of them, that say that they aren't wild, that they're feral.

JASMIN: When were the horses first identified as a "problem," and what was happening to them?

VICKERY: Well, the horses had been kind of under siege since the beginning of the century. And there used to be about two million of them back then, and they were pretty much decimated by the '70s. They were run off cliffs, they were rounded up, they were sold to slaughter. I mean, they were really kind of zeroed out in gruesome ways, very predatory ways, by all kinds of people. And so, it was in 1971 that the law was passed -- I'm gonna probably bungle the name of it 'cause I always do -- the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burros Act, which was passed by Nixon to protect them on public lands. And at that time, I think there were maybe -- I think there were about 50,000 then, and they were considered to be in danger, and of course there are far fewer of them today. So, it's interesting to compare the numbers today when the BLM, the Bureau of Land Management, is still rounding them up to 1971, when there were more of them and they were considered to be in danger, enough so that this bill was passed.

And it was extremely popular with the American public. If I remember correctly, there were more letters written in favor of this act than so many other issues of the day. It was a very, very -- it clearly stirred people up, and many people wrote in about it. In fact, I was a kid then, and I did as well. So, the issue's been around a long time.

MARIANN: Was that wild horse, Annie, was that her name, the -- one of the advocates --

VICKERY: Wild horse Annie, mm-hm.

MARIANN: She was one of the major advocates who got that law passed?

VICKERY: Yes, she was.

MARIANN: And so, once that law was passed, how did the government get involved? What was the role of the government once it was decided that these horses needed to be protected from the really, really horrifying things that were happening to them?

VICKERY: Well, I don't have the language of the law in my head, but the idea was to protect them on the lands where they existed, and different wild horse herds. And so, the purpose of the law was to protect them on public lands. And in fact, that law is not being followed. And by the way, there's a patchwork of lands that the horses exist on, and so I guess it's hard to protect them on lands -- you know, there are vast tracks of private lands, and then there are Indian nations. And in any event, it's a complicated issue.

MARIANN: Not all the horses that we're talking about are on public land. And can you explain a bit about the competition between horses and cattle for public land resources?

VICKERY: It's a competition between public lands by ranchers, mining interests, energy. You know, they want the land, they want the water, they want the mining rights. And the horses stand in between profits for a lot of ranchers and companies, and the wild horses stand in the way of that because they are existing on those lands. And so, presently, I think there are 50 times as many cattle grazing on public lands as the horses. And so, what the cattle ranchers have been very successful in doing is putting out this message through the BLM that horses are damaging the rangeland. It's a bit of a ridiculous claim for them to make because there are 50 times as many cattle and cattle and horses graze in different ways. But in any event, it's not possible for 35,000 or even 25,000 horses to out-graze 50 times as many cattle.

I'm gonna read you this statistic, which I think is pretty interesting: Eight times more federally managed land is authorized for livestock grazing than wild horses. Taxpayer-funded livestock grazing on public lands costs over 132 million dollars a year, but only 3% of America's beef supply comes from these cattle. And the price paid by the ranchers is below market value. It's \$1.35 per cow/calf combination per month. They equate one cow/calf combination to five horses. So, I think if you look at this program at every turn, it appears that the BLM have stacked the deck against horses and set them up to be predators that they really aren't.

By the way, I sat next to a rancher on my way home from Texas several weeks ago, where I was working on a story on horses. And I said to him, "Do cattle forage differently than horses, and do horses cause more damage?" And he said, "Absolutely not." So, here you even have a rancher attesting to the fact that horses do not damage rangeland when they graze.

MARIANN: Just to clarify, when you talk about the BLM, that's the Bureau of Land Management, it's a federal agency.

VICKERY: Yes.

MARIANN: And is that the agency that's in charge of the entire program?

VICKERY: Yes. It's called Wild Horses and Burros Program. And do you want to hear a little bit about that program?

JASMIN: Yeah.

MARIANN: Sure.

VICKERY: So, essentially, what it comes down to is that there are 45-50,000 mustangs and burros in captivity, long-term captivity. And so, there are more wild horses in captivity in long-range holding facilities than there are on the range. And so, essentially, what the BLM has done is they have come up with these appropriate herd levels, and they look at the different herd management areas that exist and they decide whether or not there are too many horses on them. And then they go in there and they round up horses. And they don't call them roundups; they call them "gathers." Yeah, it's a nice, very marketing-friendly term.

MARIANN: We're just gonna gather together here with the horses.

VICKERY: Yeah, and they do it by helicopter!

MARIANN: Wow.

VICKERY: And there are quite a few videos that anybody can see of these "gathers." And essentially, you got these helicopters flying right over the horses' heads, in some cases touching them, in some cases knocking them over. And they do it in some pretty extreme temperatures. Some of the wild horse advocates who monitor these activities have been out there on days where the water was frozen in their vehicles, even though the BLM was stating very strongly that the temperatures were above freezing. But they will round them up in below-freezing weather and 100-degree weather, and this includes foals, mares and foal. And they'll stampede them over very long distances. Quite a few of them get injured. Quite a few of them die as a result. And the helicopter contractors make millions of dollars off this, all funded by American taxpayers.

JASMIN: So, what happens to the horses once they are rounded up?

VICKERY: Well, so what they do is they round them up and they head them toward pens. And there is this thing called a Judas horse that is released by the people who are doing the roundup. And the Judas horse will run for the traps and the other horses will follow it. So, they get put into these enclosures, and they separate the horses. Horses exist in family bands. Generally you have stallion and some mares and foals. I think there are also other stallions that get rounded up there as well.

But in any event, so they round these bands up and they separate them out. They separate the mares and the foals, the young horses, and they make a determination as to which ones should be released. Some will be treated with contraceptives and released, and some will be put up for adoption. And so, generally, the ones that get put up for adoption are young. But people who watch these roundups have witnessed the horses getting severely injured, foals running over such difficult terrain that their hoofs luff off, 'cause of course they're not, depending upon their age, their legs are more vulnerable and their hoofs more vulnerable. They're not completely hardened. And quite a few of these horses have been found to have gone illegally to slaughter.

They do get adopted, not that many of them. Not that many people are good at training horses, and particularly wild horses. So, the fact that the BLM continues rounding up horses when there's already a glut of horses on the market because of high hay prices and the difficult economic times that a lot of horse owners face, it just doesn't make any sense for them to keep doing it. It's bad for taxpayers. It makes no sense. They could leave those horses out there and manage them on the range, and it would cost a fraction of what it's now costing taxpayers.

MARIANN: So, what's the story on the adoption programs? I've heard in the past that an enormous number of horses were being adopted and just sold to slaughter. But then I heard that that had been brought to light and some efforts had been made to address that. Is that still going on?

VICKERY: Well, yeah. It's kind of hard to know where the horses go. So, a story came out, I think it was a year ago, that the then Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar's neighbor had bought

or adopted 1700 mustangs and couldn't account for their whereabouts, but pretty much through his admissions and other methods of investigations people were pretty sure that they'd gone to slaughter. He couldn't account for their whereabouts and he also was associated with people in the slaughter business. And I was in Texas more than a year ago and I passed by a kill buyer's property, and I saw a lot of BLM horses standing in his pasture. You could tell because they had those tags around the neck. So, they're not supposed to be sold to slaughter, but there really isn't any oversight of people who do it, and I think it's pretty well-acknowledged that this goes on.

JASMIN: How much does it cost to keep the horses?

VICKERY: It costs \$100,000 a day.

MARIANN: My God.

VICKERY: Yeah. I think it's \$500 per horse per year, according to some of the figures that I looked at, and I think the program overall costs like 75-80 million dollars last count. And then they keep rounding up horses, which -- it just doesn't make any sense, you know? There's plenty of land for these horses to be on. It's not a matter of them not having enough forage. It's a matter of the uses that special interests want to put that land to. And there are of course certainly people who want to get their hands on those 50,000 mustangs in captivity and slaughter them. It's not uncommon to hear discussions of that, quite a few of them coming from the BLM itself.

JASMIN: We understand that the National Academy of Sciences has gotten involved in this issue. Can you explain?

VICKERY: The National Academy of Sciences put out a report on the Wild Horse and Burro Program and shared it, or directed it, to the BLM. And the new Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell, has not directly responded to the issues it raised. She's been asked quite a few times by news organizations and reporters and wild horse advocates what is going to happen to those 50,000 horses in captivity, and she does not address the question. She avoids it, and I think for good reason. I mean, it's not a good reason for her to avoid being transparent about it, but I think there are so many special interests involved in the BLM. It's heavily dominated by people with an economic interest in using those lands. So, as I mentioned, a lot of them would like to get rid of the wild horses because they could be slaughtered and because it would reduce the cost to taxpayers. I mean, just the entire idea of stockpiling the horses to begin with has proved to be pretty disastrous.

MARIANN: What is the ultimate answer here, Vickery, other than ending cattle ranching and mining and all the other interests? But cattle ranching, we're totally fine with ending, but chances are we're not gonna pull that off in the near future. Is the answer contraceptives?

VICKERY: Oh. Well, contraceptives can certainly keep wild horse populations down, but the fact is that the population, the actual numbers of wild horses, there's not that many of them. It's really a fallacy that the population is exploding. And that fallacy has been perpetrated by a lot of people who want to get rid of them. And if you read the news reports -- for example, the Associated Press put out all these articles saying there are 60,000 or 75 -- you know, they put out numbers all over the place. And if there's one thing the National Academy of

Sciences report stated, it's that the government didn't use science in coming up with the population figures.

Yeah, so contraceptives can definitely help. It's much better than rounding up the horses. But by the way, one thing that the National Academy of Sciences report also said was that the very fact of the roundups was causing the horses to reproduce more. So, the inference or the science was telling them that when left in a natural state, horses moderated their own reproduction rates. And so, by harassing them and zeroing them out, they were reproducing more, which I think is a pretty good reason to leave them alone with minimal intervention.

JASMIN: Before we conclude, Vickery, I just want to sort of take a step back and talk about the media because I know that, in addition to wild horses specifically, you're very passionate about the role that the media can play and should play in animal advocacy. Can you talk a little bit about that, and also about how you have gotten involved with combining your passion for animals with your career?

VICKERY: Oh yeah, definitely. Well, I noticed pretty early on in my journalistic career that the news media didn't really understand who was supporting various animal advocacy issues. They tended to portray people who were supporters of wildlife or animal welfare organizations as extremists or as animal rights groups. And I felt as I read most of the coverage of different animal issues that if journalists understood the topics better, if they did more research, if they spent more time talking to average Americans, they'd come to realize that animal welfare issues are of deep concern to the vast majority of Americans.

So, I think the important thing that journalists need to do is to recognize how widespread support for animal protection, animal welfare, anti-cruelty measures, and regulation -- Americans support that. But unfortunately, I think because journalism has been squeezed and journalists don't have the resources they once had, it's very easy for them to go online and cut and paste information that they find here and there. And there are a lot of lobbying groups masquerading as animal protection groups that give off bad information, and they do it to enrich themselves in terms of political influence.

So, what I found on the horse issue, for example, is a lot of phony information passed off as fact by pretty credible media organizations. And I will specifically mention the Associated Press, who didn't rely on lobbyists for a very extensive issue reportage on the Valley Meat Company, which is one of the horse slaughter plants trying to open in New Mexico. But they relied on the slaughter plant owner himself, pretty much exclusively, and did not fact check him. And in fact, this guy supplied most of the facts appearing in their coverage, which was reproduced tens of thousands of times by media organizations all over the world, and the guy just was not telling the truth. If you read through coverage that they put out, which made its way into ABC News and USA Today and every big media organization, it was basically this unfiltered stuff coming from the slaughter plant owner, and it proved to be false. He had dates incorrect, and data that was passed off from the GAO that turned out to be false. They put that forward as showing that when slaughter plants shut, there is an increase in animal abuse or horse abuse. All turned out to be false reporting on the part of the Associated Press, and it was picked up everywhere.

And so, as a result, I think, as a journalist, that we can't be too vigilant in fact checking. And unfortunately, there's just not a lot of it.

JASMIN: Mm. Well, we're just so glad that you're out there, shedding light on these issues in the media that people outside of, you know, the Our Hen House listeners really need to know about. And we need to be mainstreaming these issues, and the media is the way in. So, we're just so grateful that you're out there doing that, Vickery. And thank you so much for coming onto Our Hen House today and telling us a bit about what's going on with wild horses. And I will link to some articles you've written on the article that corresponds with today's podcast episode. So, listeners, you know where to find that, ourhenhouse.org. And Vickery, I can't thank you enough. Please stay in touch with us and keep us posted on what's going on.

VICKERY: Thanks so much. It was a pleasure being on your podcast.

JASMIN: That was journalist Vickery Eckhoff.