

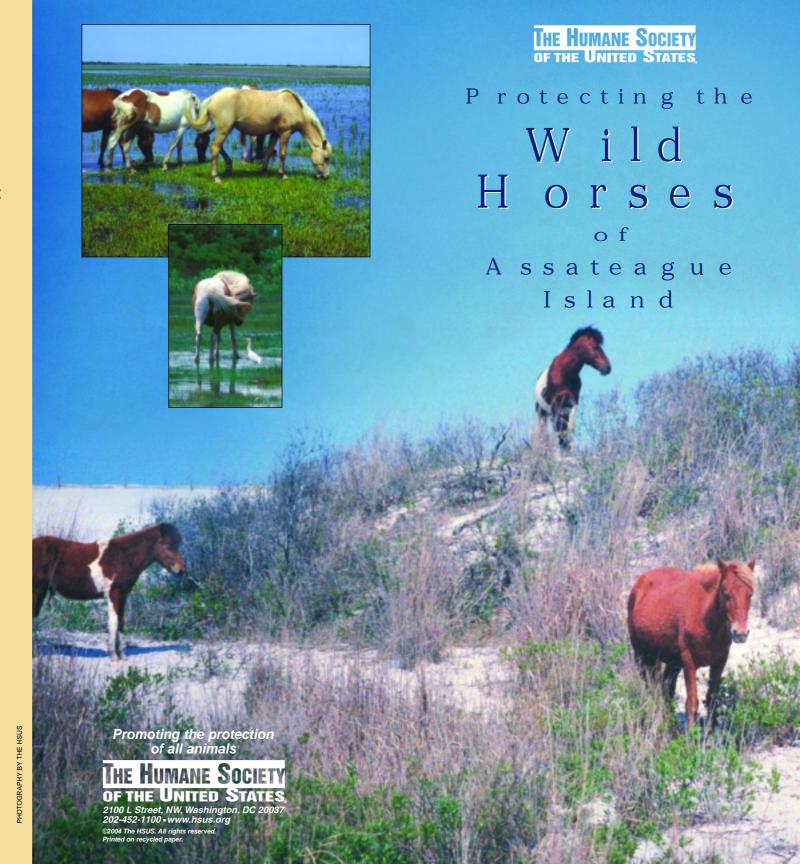
H u m a n e S t e w a r d s h i p

IN 1968 ASSATEAGUE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE began managing its 28 horses as a wild, free-roaming herd. By 1989 the island's wild horse population had reached 142, and something had to be done. The fragile dune and marsh grasses were threatened by the pressure of too many hooves and hungry mouths.

In 1988, at the invitation of the National Park Service (NPS), Drs. Jay Kirkpatrick, John Turner, and Irwin Liu brought a new contraceptive vaccine, porcine zona pellucida (PZP), to Assateague. Dr. Liu had already shown that PZP prevented pregnancy in domestic mares, but would it work in the field? Drs. Kirkpatrick and Turner vaccinated the Assateague horses using a dart rifle—without ever capturing or handling a horse—and reduced pregnancy rates in treated mares by 90-95 percent. The vaccine didn't affect the unborn foals of pregnant mares or alter the horses' social behavior. And, after 16 years of research, we now know that it actually extends the mares' lives by sparing them the burdens of raising foals. Contraception is maintained with an annual booster, but it's reversible—mares can become pregnant if vaccinations are stopped.

In 1995, with the horse population reaching 173, the NPS conducted an environmental review and decided to gradually reduce the number to 150. PZP would be its management tool. Working with The HSUS, Dr. Kirkpatrick and the NPS began island-wide contraception under a strict management plan that assured that every mare would have an opportunity to reproduce to safeguard the genetic health of the herd.

With the horses' numbers controlled by contraception, the threat they pose to the fragile island ecosystem diminishes, as well. And our success on Assateague shows that ecological stewardship and the humane treatment of wildlife can be applied in partnership to benefit land, animals, and the people who enjoy both.



ILD HORSES HAVE LIVED ON ASSATEAGUE Island for more than two hundred years. They eat, drink, sleep, socialize, and raise their young on Assateague Island National Seashore—it's their home.

The Assateague animals—like all horses—are amazingly adaptable. Often referred to as "ponies," they are in fact true horses and have survived by becoming more efficient in their use of the limited food and water available in this harsh environment. Part of this survival mechanism is a decrease in the size of the individual horses over many generations. Their smaller size has led people to call them ponies, but they are powerful wild horses.

## Visiting the Horses

The Assateague horses are *wild* animals, and they behave accordingly. Like African zebras, they may attack aggressively when they believe they're being threatened. Sudden movements from people may startle them and cause them to bite or kick. Stallions are very protective of the mares in their harems and mares are very protective of their foals. They may look docile, but don't be fooled. These horses are strong, resourceful, and independent.

To enjoy your visit to the fullest, please follow a few simple rules:

■ DON'T FEED THE HORSES. It is strictly prohibited by the National Park Service and can cause serious health and survival problems for the horses later on. Horses are not picky eaters and will eat just about anything offered to them. They enjoy junk food as much as we do, but this limits their intake and ability to digest the food necessary for them to survive the cold, wet times of the year when there are few—if any—visitors to offer handouts.

Store all food in sturdy, latched containers to avoid having your campsite ransacked by prowling horses looking for goodies. They are not tidy animals. Even a fluffy sleeping bag can look tasty.

The most important reason not to feed the horses is that feeding them brings them close to people and vehicles. This is dangerous for you—some horses will stick their heads into a car window looking for food and can get quite aggressive if there's nothing to eat. This is also dangerous for the horses—they may be large animals but they're no match for cars. Every year at least one horse tragically dies from an automobile collision.

■ RESPECT THE HORSES' PRIVACY. An Assateague horse's life is a struggle. Day and night they have to graze, try to stay cool (or warm), evade flies and mosquitoes, conserve energy, feed and guard their foals, and keep up with the social rituals of their

groups. So they may become quite cranky if you try to approach, pet, chase, or otherwise harass them. In response, they can inflict serious injury with a sharp bite or kick.

■ DRIVE SLOWLY AND CAUTIOUSLY. Assateague isn't a raceway—it's a place to relax and enjoy the animals and plants. Opportunistic horses often hang out by the roads looking for food offerings because many have come to associate vehicles with food. And horses are very vulnerable to being struck by a moving vehicle, especially at night. Wild horses rarely survive such an impact.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is working with the National Park Service to protect the Assateague horses, and we thank you for showing the animals the respect they deserve. The HSUS is dedicated to the protection of all animals and to helping people and wildlife share our planet in peace. We all want to enjoy these beautiful wild horses for many more generations.

All contributions placed in the National Seashore's donation boxes help fund the maintenance of the island—and improvements to it—and help educate the public about the wonderful wild horses of Assateague.

Special thanks to Jay Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., of the Science and Conservation Center at ZooMontana, and Allison Turner, biological technician for the Division of Resource Management, NPS, Assateague Island National Seashore, for providing some of the information for this brochure.

