Starving for Life

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Abstract

This composition addresses issues raised by those for horse slaughter and those against it in the United States. Horse slaughter was an industry that was eradicated from the country in 2007. The view points of each side is discussed, with the main idea focusing around the fact that opening horse slaughter in this country could mean saving millions of starving horses from a cruel death and mean feeding millions of starving people. Several factors are used to help support this thought, such as, the differentiation between horses being considered as pets or as livestock; the reasons why horses are over populated; the economic benefits to opening slaughter plants in the U.S.; and how slaughter is not as cruel as abuse, neglect, abandonment, or starvation. This paper will further illustrate the necessity for action to better the lives of horses and mankind alike.
Tonight 963 million people will go to sleep hungry. One child every five seconds will die from hunger-related causes. This totals 16,000 children every day (Bread for the World, 2009). Hunger is not the conclusion to these people’s suffering. It exists as a vast emptiness that dwells in lives and affects the people it afflicts irrevocably. Examples of this are:

Hunger manifests itself in many ways other than starvation and famine. Most poor people, who battle hunger, deal with chronic undernourishment and vitamin or mineral deficiencies, which results in stunted growth, weakness and heightened susceptibility to illness. Countries in which a large portion of the population battles hunger daily are usually poor and often lack the social safety nets we enjoy, such as soup kitchens, food stamps, and job training programs. When a family that lives in a poor country cannot grow enough food or earn enough money to buy food, there is nowhere to turn for help. (Bread for the World, 2009)

The United States has a resource that could, at the very least, help hunger in this country. It is a brutally controversial subject that leaves many people on the sidelines not knowing which way to turn. Both sides to the story have strong arguments with valid points. However, opening horse slaughter in this country could mean saving millions of starving horses from a cruel death and mean feeding millions of starving people.

There is a line drawn in the sand between those for and those opposing horse slaughter. The people of the United States do not entertain ideas of eating horse meat. It is not something Americans are accustomed to and can be revolting to even those who are for horse slaughter. Eating horse is not in the realm of our cultural beliefs. This country views beef, pork, poultry, and fish as the main source for protein in people’s diet.
Other countries of the world view horse as a delicacy in which the horse is considered to be the equivalent of beef to Americans. These countries raise horses as our country raise cattle for the purpose of meat. The reality is, we cannot stop horse slaughter altogether because we are powerless against the other countries that actively participate in it. Activists in this country that are for slaughter are not asking the nation’s population to start eating horse meat; they are simply hoping to relieve some of the tragedy that has surrounded horses since the closure of slaughter plants.

Many people hold horses as pets, friends, and even more intimately, as part of the family. They are an animal comparable to dogs and cats, meant to be a companion. People seek the same pleasures from horses as they do the smaller animals. An emotional attachment is formed and these animals cannot be viewed by their owners as livestock intended for meat. For those of the nation that believe horses can only be pets, it is difficult to explain how others see them as a means to make money.

Farmers and ranchers of this nation were hurt by the closure of the slaughter plants. For these people, horses are viewed as livestock that are raised for profit as a part of a business, just like cattle, hogs, and chickens. Many livelihoods have been hindered by the horse market that has crashed. Not so long ago horses were fetching a large amount of money in the sale ring and demand was high. Breeders from all over took advantage of the market and bred as many horses as they could. According to the Sioux City Journal “local sale barn operators a 2007 ruling that closed a DeKalb, IL, horse-processing plant – the last in the United States – along with high feed prices and high fuel costs has severely depressed a market already saturated with horses that were bred during better economic times (Montag, 2008). The trouble is due to a surplus of horses and not
enough buyers. There is nothing wrong with these horses, but business men have a hard
time making more on a horse than what they have invested in the horse.

The people treating horses as a business did not necessarily breed horses for the
intent of slaughter. A large portion of these horses were bred and raised for uses such as
ranch, rodeo, or other competition type areas. According to Jim Olson from the Sioux
City Journal, “argues that organizations such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment
of Animals) tell owners what they can’t do with their horse, but don’t give them a viable
alternative. Nobody has given us what we are supposed to do with our horses when
they’re old and worn out” (Montag, 2008). Not only are there horses that are old and
worn out with no place to go, but there are horses that are lame with no use and that are
unmanageable in respect to their behavior. Euthanasia is not an option these people wish
to use because they believe it is a waste of perfectly good products to simply euthanize
and dispose of a horse.

Slaughter is not a plausible antidote to cure overpopulation of cats and dogs and
so it should not be a cure for horses. Activist against slaughter believe the idea behind
population control of our domestic pets, which is spay and neuter programs, should be
implemented for horses. However, these programs have not really managed the issue of
over breeding. The issue with dogs and cats is not a small one, but these animals are
much easier to accommodate for due to their smaller size and smaller appetites.

Putting a stop to breeding horses in this nation would be impossible to achieve. It
would take resources unimaginable to keep people from breeding and the many horse
associations in America would be a force to reckon with that would not stand for such a
ruling. However, the population of horses is soaring out of control and statistics from
2005 reported that there were 9.2 million horses just in the United States. This number was up from 5.3 million in 1999 (Zeiss-Stange, 2008). The sheer numbers of these animals speaks volumes for a need that something must be done.

Currently anti-slaughter activists are trying hard to get the borders closed to prevent the slaughter of any horses from the United States. It is feared that “current legislation pending in Congress that would ban sending horses to slaughterhouses in Canada and Mexico would leave the region’s horse owners without viable options to get rid of unwanted animals” (Montag, 2008). What would the outlook for horses look like if the boarders were closed? A nation where horse slaughter was banned completely would continue to slowly be depleted of vegetation by unwanted horses that go feral, leading to famine, disease, and death of the horses and destroyed livelihoods of people.

Horses are an expensive animal to keep. In today’s economy many people can no longer afford the family pet. Many factors need to be considered such as “training, vet care, tack and feed, and the expense averages $1,800 to $2,400 per animal, per year – and rising, as grain, hay, and fuel costs increase” (Zeiss-Stange, 2008). When people are forced to choose between feeding their horse and feeding their children, the choice is simple; no family would neglect their own flesh and blood for an animal.

The options people against slaughter offer in situations where people can no longer afford their family friend are rescue operations or euthanasia. Rescue leagues are overwhelmed by the number of unwanted horses and are forced to turn people away. Euthanasia can be expensive and for people that are already drowning in financial crisis, this may not be a viable option. Numbers show that “veterinarian-administered euthanasia by lethal injection can cost $85 to $100. An owner who doesn’t have land to
bury the horse faces an additional $100 to $125 for a local rendering truck to dispose of the body” (Montag, 2008). These prices may vary from region to region and can cost much more.

The Government announced “the U.S. economy lost 651,000 jobs in February, as the unemployment rate soared to 8.1 percent, its highest level since 1983. Since the recession began in December 2007, 4.4 million jobs, or 3.2 percent of the total work force, have been lost. More than half of those positions – about 2.6 million – have disappeared in the past four months alone” (Healey, 2009). This is because in our current economic situation, animals can be easily forgotten about. Lifting the ban on horse slaughter would create a new avenue for people and horses.

Slaughterhouses of the past were owned by foreign companies and the meat was shipped over seas. Those against slaughter feel our economy was not hurt by the closure of the plants because the industry began and ended with foreign lands. However, when examined closer, the business of horse slaughter produces more than just meat. Every part of the horse is utilized in one way or another except for the internal organs and the brain. Leather items, hair brushes, wigs, glue, and even bows for musical instruments are products made from horses.

If slaughter was allowed to reopen in this country, it could be a government owned and run operation. Opening plants would bring much needed jobs to an economy engulfed by economic hardship. Not only would a slaughterhouse bring jobs to the market, it would create jobs in other industries. Sale barns would pick up business, hauling companies would have more to haul, and ranchers would increase production of
their livestock. It is true that the meat would go to foreign buyers, but the profit would belong to this nation and all the people employed in the process.

The United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) examined this industry thoroughly. Statements were made that “the horse industry is a business (but that doesn’t mean all horse owners are trying to be involved at a business level). This industry directly generates $39 billion in the US economy and has a $102 billion multiplier impact. It provides 460,000 full-time equivalent jobs. This industry pays over $1.9 billion in government taxes. In our current economic climate, can we truly “turn” on a business that is providing this kind of impact to the US economy?” (Heleski, 2008) With numbers this strong that are backed by research done by the United States Government, it is impractical to ignore the impact this industry would have on the economy and the people of this nation.

Even with the economy in shambles, the cornerstone of the argument between sides has been about the humane treatment of the horse. Anti-slaughter activist won over American’s with pleas of the inhumane handling horses received on the way to and at the slaughterhouses. In 1989 horse slaughter in the United States hit an all time high of 348,400 horses (Animal Welfare Institute, 2008). At one point there were a total of ten slaughter plants in the country. The number of horses slaughtered each year stayed strong through the 1990s. By the late 1990’s many of the slaughter plants began to feel the pressure from anti-slaughter activists and chose to shut operations down. In 2000 only 47,134 horses were slaughtered (Animal Welfare Institute, 2008). 2007 marked the final days of horse slaughter in the United States. That year only 29,761 horses were
slaughtered in the remaining three plants and by the end of that year all three closed their doors (Animal Welfare Institute, 2008).

Those against horse slaughter believe the method the plants used to kill the horses was not accurate and because of this was not humane. According to government regulations, the slaughterhouses that were in the United States used a device called a captive bolt pistol. It is powered by compressed air or a blank cartridge and drives a bolt into the horse’s brain. This device is used in other slaughterhouses such as cattle processing plants. The inhumane aspect of this method is perceived to be cruel because if the employee misses the target, the results are devastating.

Anti-slaughter activists want to close the boarders because the methods used in our neighbor’s slaughter plants are even more gruesome. The common method employed in Mexico to kill the horse is very contentious. A sharp knife is used to sever the spinal cord near the poll. The poll is the area immediately behind the ears where the underlying bones are the top of the skull bone and the bones of the neck. Many videos exist of slaughterhouse employees missing the spinal cord on the first try. These animals suffer greatly and panic, making it even harder for the employee to hit the spinal cord the second time.

Another plea entered into the picture by those opposing slaughter and wanting to close our boarders revolves around the way these horses are transported to the other countries or even in our own country when slaughter existed. Horses from this nation bound for slaughter now take a grueling trip across the country to our neighbors, Canada and Mexico. They appeal to everyone by telling tales of cruelty these animals endure on their trip. Once again arguments are made about horses not being livestock and they
should not be treated as if they are. There is no doubt a trip across the United States
crammed into a trailer with other strange horses, is going to be stressful and hard on the
animal. Horses are not created the same as other animals considered to be livestock.
These creatures are highly excitable and very territorial. Placing them in close quarters
with unfamiliar horses is a recipe for disaster.

No real answer exists for the best means of transporting these animals. The only
real solution offered is shortening the distance these animals have to travel from the sale
barn to the slaughterhouse. Unfortunately, the best means of providing this solution is to
open several plants across the country. If these plants were in strategic locations, it could
effectively reduce the time these animals spend being transported from the sale barn. The
other comfort offered is that it is in the best interest of the buyers to take the utmost care
of these animals because if they are damaged in route, the plant can not process the meat
and revenue would be lost.

The question those for the reopening of horse slaughter want answered is: at the
end of the day does the termination of horse slaughter in the United States truly help the
horse, or are we honestly hurting them more by not allowing slaughter plants to exist in
this country? Is slaughter really a lesser fate for these beasts than abuse, neglect,
abandonment, or starvation?

An undeniable argument is made because abuse, neglect, starvation and
unnecessary euthanasia are on the rise. The only mutual factor these cases have in
common points to the steady decline in the economy and the closing of the horse
slaughterhouses in 2007. Many associations spoke out against closing slaughter plants
such as:
The American Veterinary Medical Association came out against the ban, fearing rescue shelters would be swamped with hundreds of unwanted horses while others would be sold to unregulated slaughterhouses in foreign countries and be brutalized even more. (Walller, 2006)

Abuse, neglect and abandonment have caused more rescue operations to spring up across the nation. Even with more facilities out there to accommodate these unwanted and mistreated horses, the rescue leagues have been inundated with the number of horses. For example “horse rescue operators in Runnels, IA, and Fairfield, NE, say they are financially strapped and at full capacity” (Montag, 2008). Katie Merwick spoke with The Seattle Times and stated, “About a year and a half ago she noticed the phone starting to ring a lot more at Second Chance Ranch, the horse-rescue outfit she runs in Elma, Grays Harbor County, 30 miles west of Olympia, WA. I don’t want my horse anymore, callers would say. I can’t afford it. Can you take it? What do I do?” (Ramirez, 2009). These are only a few of the many rescue leagues that have felt the impact of the economy. The amounts of donations are down, decreasing the number of animals they can comfortably support.

Another issue that has been on the rise was also addressed by Merwick is that “all but three of the 46 horses she took in last year were animal-control seizures. The year before, two were seizures. I have the ability to help, but I can’t go bankrupt doing it, she says. And with most horses needing six to nine months of rehabilitation, the challenge isn’t space. It’s funding” (Ramirez, 2009). Even if the horses are capable of being rehabilitated and have the possibility to be adopted out, the rescue operations are faced with the bold fact that many people cannot afford to have a horse. The number of people
willing to adopt or able to, is far out weighed by the number of horses needed to be adopted.

These facts only continue to support that if the borders are closed to horse slaughter and the states do not reopen it in this country, it is expected that abandonment, neglect, abuse, and starvation numbers will only continue to escalate. The plea for a solution was broadened by an article printed by USA Today:

In January of 2008, 48 emaciated thoroughbred horses – some believed to be descendents of Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew – were rescued from a farm in Loudoun County, VA. In March of 2008, 70 Tennessee Walking horses were removed from a farm in Jessamine County, KY. Officials said that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the worst condition, most of the horses rated a 1.5. In May of 2008, 120 starving horses were rescued from a ranch in Central Florida when, according to reports, their owner had become overwhelmed by the demand of caring for them. (Zeiss-Stange, 2008)

Unnecessary euthanasia is another tragedy horses have been put up against. Even with the high price of euthanasia, it is on the rise. Veterinarian Gerald Kitto reports “he has euthanized more horses this past year than ever before. He has administered approximately 35 this past year, compared to a couple of times in more normal years” (Donovan, 2009). Those people who contact a veterinarian may be presented with another option if they cannot afford the standard method of euthanasia. Some veterinarians will use a much less expensive method. Kitto stated to The Bismark Tribune “that it is better if he puts a horse down with a .375 Magnum than someone who can’t correctly locate a fist-sized brain in a large head mass. He knows exactly where to place a
bullet to kill a horse instantaneously. It isn’t his preferred method, but he’ll do it if a horse owner can’t afford the $300 or so for euthanasia and disposal” (Donovan, 2009). This method of euthanasia is very similar to the method used in a slaughter plant. Kitto commented “that he can’t see where they’re (activists) getting it that the captive bolt pistol is so inhumane versus what we’re doing” (Donovan, 2009). Employees of the slaughter plants used the captive bolt method when the industry was still in operation and these employees were trained, just as veterinarians are, where to place the device to have the desired effect.

Abandonment is another issue Kitto addressed in his interview by saying “not only is he putting down more horses than ever, he’s also seeing more of them roaming because their owners are out of feed. Some are dropped off, starving, at his clinic. I’ve never seen that in my career until now” (Donovan, 2009). Abandonment is a real issue that people need to realize exists. USA Today reported “most states do not record exact numbers on abandoned horses. In 2007, the Unwanted Horse Coalition estimated that 170,000 abandoned horses lived in the U.S. It is estimated that 200 of 1,200 wild horses overpopulating the Virginia Range near Reno, are actually strays. Many won’t survive in the wild, and mustangs could be at risk of disease from domestic horses” (Zeiss-Stange, 2008). There is no plausible approach to identifying where all these horses have come from. This makes no one accountable for these horses and no solution to fix the risks the domestic or the wild horses are faced with.

The sale barns have too been faced with a challenge of forsaken horses that was not quite expected. The Sioux City Journal states that “before the ban on slaughtering, a 1,000 pound horse that couldn’t sell as a trained saddle horse would bring about $600”
(Montag, 2008). As the economy declined and the plants closed the prices for horses slumped as well. The USDA states that “at recent auctions horses have sold for as little as $10 to $20 apiece” (Heleski, 2008). In some cases horses do not bring a bid. Buyers for the foreign processing plants can afford to be choosy with prices so low. Many of the owners leave before their horse sells and this can result in the sale barn owner trying to figure out what to do with the deserted horse.

A resolution may be on the horizon for these animals. Four states are currently discussing opening or studying the idea of opening slaughterhouses for horses in their states. Montana, Missouri, North Dakota, and Wyoming have led the way to opening American’s eyes to the atrocity these horses will face if something doesn’t change soon. Senators in Missouri have gone on record stating “it’s cruel to force old or lame horses to wait for a natural death. The unintended consequence has been disastrous for horses. We now have horses all over the state that are skin and bones that are suffering tremendously, said Senator Matt Bartle, R-Lee’s Summit” (Lieb, 2009). These states have been able to bring to light the torment horses all over the country are facing on a daily basis.

Other states have brought rise to concern over the inhumane slaughter of horses in our neighboring countries. Representative Ed Butcher, R-Winifred, the bill’s sponsor, said “this bill is really about providing a humane and regulated processing plant (about the Montana proposed bill). This is a business and we want to look at it. We want to have a humane way to address this problem. House Majority Leader Margarett Campbell, D-Poplar, said she’s been in the horse-breeding business most of her life, and that with the economy souring, many people are unable to take care of their horses and dispose of them in humane ways. A slaughter plant would be a good solution” (Dennison, 2009).
Many feel it is unfair to the horses to simply euthanize and dispose of them humanely when humane measures can be taken to utilize them even after death.

There is cause for vehement debate over this situation. The chasm between these two sides is clearly illustrated. However, in reality people for and people opposing horse slaughter are truly on the same side; both want desperately to seek humane treatment of these creatures. The ultimate decision should be based on what is best for the horse. The people for reopening slaughter in this country are not heathens wishing to brutalize innocent beings; they are people trying to save these blameless creatures from a fate worse than death.

Slaughter is not intended to change the way society views horses. Many of these animals are pets, friends, and a part of the family. The right to ownership will still stand for those who wish to exercise it. This solution would simply offer salvation to animals suffering from abuse, neglect, abandonment and starvation. The United States could make a stand to better the lives of millions of horses and in the process this country would have the power to help lift some of our people out of the economic distress that has bequest them by providing jobs this industry would create. Most importantly, in an indirect manor, people in this nation would not be faced with going to sleep hungry. Let us not limit ourselves to caring about the horse’s rights, let us think about human rights and do what is best for millions of starving horses and millions of starving humans.
References


References

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