**Audio Transcript**

*Note: Episodes of Outside/In are made as pieces of audio, and some context and nuance may be lost on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors.*

**Nate Hegyi: Hey this is Outside/In. I’m Nate Hegyi. I wanna make an argument for a new national emblem for the United States. The bald eagle just isn’t cutting it.**

**It’s too… cool. Too perfect. Everyone loves an eagle.**

[eagle SFX]

**For these divisive times, we need an animal that is badass… but also polarizing. Destructive.**

**This is why I humbly nominate the wild horse.**

[horse SFX]

**Horses are symbols of freedom, strength and the American West.**

**There are rock songs about them**

*Music clip: Wild, wild horses…*

**Sports teams named after them…**

*Sports clip… And the broncos will win.*

**And when you want to rip down a desert highway at 120 miles an hour? You do it in a Ford Mustang.**

*Commercial: When you see a man with horse sense, a mustang is what he takes.*

**Nate Hegyi: But out where wild horses actually roam wild … you’ll hear a different story. Some folks in the West - especially ranchers - say that horses are pests. An invasive species whose population is way out of control.**

**There have even been stories in the news, of people taking the issue into their own hands.**

*News Montage:* [*Advocates say they have found more horses shot to death in Northern Arizona*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mWVnkC9I2Y)*… Horses, all babies, one of them dead, two in very bad shape…* [*A Lyon County man was accused of shooting and killing a wild horse with a crossbow*](https://www.2news.com/news/protesters-pack-courthouse-for-wild-horse-killed-with-crossbow/article_770af2a8-5e71-11ee-a2f7-9fbf07b37213.html)

**Nate Hegyi: These are extreme cases.**

**But as a reporter with more than a decade of experience… I can tell you that wild horses are by far the most controversial issue that I’ve covered.**

**I mean…**

**What’s more American than that?**

**Again, this is Outside/In, I’m Nate Hegyi, and today on the show, what happens when a symbol of the American spirit is allowed to run wild? Stay tuned.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: Do you like hot sauce?*

*Nate Hegyi: Yeah!*

**Nate Hegyi: A few weeks ago. I met Craig Iron Pipe at his cattle ranch on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. He was cooking up some ramen noodles.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: My cousin makes this hot sauce and I can’t eat these noodles without it*

**Nate Hegyi: But I wasn’t there for lunch. I was there because if there is anyone that represents America’s complicated relationship with the horse… it’s probably Craig.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: So that movie there is called Geronimo.*

*Nate Hegyi: Okay, Geronimo.*

**Nate Hegyi: Craig spent years as a stuntman. There are photos of him riding horses in Hollywood movies all over the place. Ever seen that Michael Jackson video Black or White?**

**He was in that.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: So that was us on the horses running around the stage down there in LA*

**Nate Hegyi: Craig says he practically grew up on horses on the reservation. Riding them feels as natural as driving a car.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: I lived out here in the country and the thing was, that was our entertainment was to get on a horse and there was no fences back then. And so we just rode and rode all day long exploring.*

**Nate Hegyi: The Blackfeet reservation… it’s a good place to explore. It looks like it’s out of a movie. There are windswept plains, jutting mountains, and a lot of horses here.**

**Now, it can be controversial to call any animal invasive or non-native. But I will say this about horses.**

**While their ancestors evolved in North America… they were pretty small, looked like** [**zebras**](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ancient-horse.htm#:~:text=Equus%20scotti%20was%20one%20of,extinct%20by%2010%2C000%20years%20ago.) **and they went extinct during the last Ice Age.**

**The modern day horse, it arrived in North America with the *Spanish* in the 1500s.**

**Then it spread north… from tribe to tribe until the Blackfeet got ahold of them in the 17th century.**

**This was a domesticated animal.**

**And just like America was later transformed by the automobile, Blackfeet culture was transformed by the horse.**

**They could carry hundreds of pounds of gear… travel 40 or 50 miles a day, even chase down bison.**

**Families… they would have dozens… sometimes even hundreds of horses.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: And that's how our wealth was, was measured by was how many horses you had.*

**Nate Hegyi: But times have changed… and nowadays… Craig says there are *too many* horses on the reservation.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: So look over in the pines. Right over there.*

**Nate Hegyi: After lunch, Craig took me out driving in his pickup truck. We were searching for horses and we pulled over near a small pond.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: You can't miss him he’s right there.*

*Nate Hegyi: I might be looking too far.*

*CP: Put your hunting eyes on.*

*Nate Hegyi: [00:21:26-00:21:32] You know, I feel really embarrassed right now. C’mon Nate. There he is. Yeah, there he is.*

**Nate Hegyi: It was a brown mustang… grazing… silhouetted against some short, scraggly pine. The kind of scene that would make a wildlife photographer giddy.**

**But as we kept driving… we started seeing more of them.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: Well, there's a bunch of horses right there.*

*Nate Hegyi: Three more up there.*

*Craig Iron Pipe: Those are cows.*

*Nate Hegyi: Oh, there's a cow.*

*Craig Iron Pipe: There's some horses in here also.*

**Nate Hegyi: at one point Craig pulled over, looked out onto the prairie, and just started counting.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. About 25. That's visible right there.*

*Nate Hegyi: It's almost like there's this plentiful as you see, deer, you know, on the side of the road.*

**Nate Hegyi: All of these horses are free-roaming. This means that they were either born wild or have been abandoned by their owners.**

**Almost every single one that I saw… their heads were down… grazing.**

**Just like a car, a horse needs a lot of fuel.**

**We’re talking 20 pounds of grass or shrubs a day to keep healthy. And they don’t just nibble - unlike cows, they eat grass right down to the root.**

**Horses are also voracious breeders. In good conditions, herds can double in size every few years. So nowadays, there are at least 16,000 of these very hungry horses roaming a reservation that’s about a third the size of New Hampshire.**

**The result? There are entire fields that look more like brown, dirt deserts… save for some patches of green.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: Okay, so that’s juniper.   So that’s what replaced the grass here.*

*Nate Hegyi: Oh wow, so this is completely it almost looks denuded, except for, as you said, juniper, which is just kind of a very low growing.*

*Craig Iron Pipe: So juniper is mother nature’s way of keeping the topsoil here. So without topsoil, nothing will grow. So you know how long it takes to make dirt?*

*Nate Hegyi: No.*

*Craig Iron Pipe: So the natural way over 100 years.*

**Nate Hegyi: The horses don’t really graze on the juniper. But they eat almost everything else. Craig said it would take at least five years for grass to regrow in these denuded fields.**

**While there are rules here about where ranchers can put *their* cows and for how long… no one controls where these horses decide to go.**

**Which means they’re also getting onto ranchland.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: So we’re going into my field right here.*

**Nate Hegyi: Craig, like a lot of other families here, raises cattle. They became ranchers and farmers after the government forced the Blackfeet onto this reservation in the late 1800s.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: So when I took my dad’s place over, our family’s ranch, I started studying how to be confined, basically. So all these fences came up.  So we have a field here, this eastern part of my field, that's where my horses are. So we've only owned, you know, anywhere from 2 to 5 horses at the most. That's because of the land. That's what the land can handle.*

**Nate Hegyi: The rest of his fields have cows on them. He can sell *them* for more than $1000 a head.**

**That is a livelihood.**

**So when you find some hungry horses on the same rangeland you have your cows on…**

*Craig Iron Pipe: there's big, big competition*

**Nate Hegyi:This is where the heart of the controversy is… one introduced species – the horse – competing against another introduced species – the cow.**

**They both arrived with the Spanish in Mexico. They are both symbols of the West. But…**

*Craig Iron Pipe: Right now there’s no economy for the horses. For somebody that's raising cattle, there's always every year you get a, you get a. And you get a paycheck.*

**Nate Hegyi: This isn’t just a Blackfeet problem. There are roughly 225,000 horses roaming freely in the western United States on both reservations and federal public lands. The population has more than *tripled* since 2007.**

**Now… the United States has few qualms about killing animals it deems a nuisance. We hunt feral pigs in the south. Invasive deer in Hawaii.**

**Heck, there’s a federal government agency that kills more than 50,000 coyotes every year because they sometimes eat cattle and sheep out West.**

**But horses are a different story.**

*Tolani Francisco: Who doesn't love a horse?*

**Nate Hegyi: This is Tolani Francisco. She’s a veterinarian, wild horse expert and enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe.**

*Tolani Francisco: I mean, look at them. They’re majestic. They’re wonderful animals. I mean, I grew up reading books like My Friend Flicka and Justin Morgan Had a Horse and Black Beauty and and all of these things. And so I think that there… is there is a generalized love, but there's also a generalized misunderstanding about a horse.*

**Nate Hegyi: It wasn’t always this way. Americans used to view horses more practically - as beasts of burden. We rode them to  war, they hauled our hay… the first cabs in New York City were pulled by horses.**

**And when they couldn’t pull that cab anymore… we sent them to the slaughterhouse. Turned them into dog food. Into glue.**

**Out West, we actually rounded up and killed those wild mustangs because they were just that – wild and of very little use.**

**But by the 1950’s, times were -a-changing. Combustion engines, measured in horse-power, had taken over.  And those wild herds out West were dwindling.**

**So it didn’t take long for horses to become nostalgic symbols of America's past. In 1946, Black Beauty hit movie theaters. John Ford westerns got popular.**

*Clip: By day and by night they rode, hell bent to glory*

**And the idea of cowboys brutally rounding up wild horse herds and shooting them… didn’t sit right with a lot of Americans.**

**So this bizarre coalition of activists, Hollywood actors, country singers, and even a conservative writer  from New Hampshire all lobbied Congress to protect those wild horses out West.**

**And it worked.**

**They passed a series of laws protecting wild horse herds on federal public lands. No hunting. No shooting. It’s similar to how we protect bald eagles in this country.**

*Tolani Francisco: it says this in the law that they, you know, are icons of the American West, the pioneer spirit. Well, to natives, yeah. Okay, maybe that's not a good way to say it.*

**Nate Hegyi: For Tolani, the wild horse is more of a symbol of colonialism.**

*Tolani Francisco: my ancestry has been here since time immemorial from the Pueblo of Laguna. And we speak the Keras language And the word for horse in the Keras language is caballo.*

*Nate Hegyi: Which is the Spanish word for horse.*

*Tolani Francisco: Yeah, yeah. So very, very similar.*

**Nate Hegyi: Regardless, she says, these protections mean that the federal government has a responsibility to manage these horses.**

**Tolani works for the USDA as a wild horse and burro coordinator.  She says one of their duties is to set limits for how big a herd can grow.**

*Tolani Francisco: the AML was set… appropriate management level. Sorry. I used an acronym and I try not to use those. Appropriate management level was set by the federal government at around 26,000 for these Western states. And we are currently significantly over that, probably to the tune of about 80. I think the last I've heard is somewhere in the 70 to 80,000 range, maybe even more.*

**Nate Hegyi: Federal agencies have been trying to get those numbers down… but they’ve run into problems.**

**Right now, the most common method is roundups. Contractors will use a helicopter to corral herds.  Then, they take some of them  to facilities where they can be adopted.**

**Now… the average cost for a recreational horse is around three-thousand dollars. But the government will actually pay you to adopt a wild mustang.** [**Up to a thousand dollars**](https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/adoptions-and-sales/adoption-incentive-program#:~:text=To%20encourage%20more%20adopters%20to,or%20burro%20from%20the%20BLM.)**! But:**

*Tolani Francisco: Not every horse is going to be the lovable, gentle, you know, animal that that we all want them want to believe that they are.*

**Nate Hegyi: That’s the problem. I mean, we’ve seen in the movies: Wild horses need a *ton* of training. So a lot of these rounded up mustangs? They end up languishing in long-term holding facilities… Pens that are paid for by U.S. taxpayers.**

**The roundups are also super controversial. Every year, some of the horses get spooked by the helicopters, get injured, and die.**

**So wild horse advocates – they want the federal government to launch an aggressive birth control campaign instead.**

**But Tolani says that’s tricky. The birth control needs to be administered to mares every year… and people have to get close enough to those wild horses to hit them with a dart from a gun.**

*Tolani Francisco: And so to a lot of these populations, um, like out at Laguna, I can't get within a half mile and the horses take off.*

**Nate Hegyi: This kind of birth control *has* worked on horse herds that are already used to humans. But there are a lot of them out there that aren’t.**

**There is another solution.**

*Nate Hegyi: the one that nobody ever wants to talk about the deadly grim Reaper.*

**Nate Hegyi: This is Outside/In. I’m Nate Hegyi.**

**My family came into town over the holidays. And one night we went to the Buckhorn bar. It’s a classic burger-and-beer joint. And sure enough, I ordered their half-pound burger… took a big bite, loved it.**

**The meat is local. Here in Montana, I am surrounded by thousands of cows… *and* horses.**

**But we only eat those cows. Why is that?**

*Susanna Forrest: horsemeat was taboo, sort of unchristian.*

**Nate Hegyi: This is Susanna Forest. She’s a writer who has focused on the history of eating - or not eating - horse. And in Europe… it wasn’t always this way. The Germans were chowing down on horse until Christianity came along.**

**The old testament deemed horses as “unclean animals” not fit for eating.**

**Cattle, however, were listed as clean.**

**In the 700s, the pope was sending out letters to the Germans and others telling them to quit cooking up horse steaks.**

*Susanna Forrest: it become quite extreme to the point where in the 17th century, someone in France was actually executed for eating horse meat during lent.*

**Nate Hegyi: All this changed during the Napoleonic wars. They ushered in famine and poverty… people needed a source of red meat and protein. And back then, horses were like cars.**

*Susanna Forrest: Copenhagen, I think, was the first place to legalize horse meat consumption. And that was because the British were laying siege to it in 1807, I think. And this sort of kicked off - it was really an idea that became popular in some countries faster than others. The French, for example, held off for a really long time. And some people actually think it was the siege of Paris much later in the century that finally tipped the balance.*

**Nate Hegyi: Across the pond, America – bathed in its Judeo-Christian roots – was watching Europe’s newfound taste for horse with absolute disgust and horror.**

*Susanna Forrest: oh, look, it's poor Europe. This is what they have to do in the old country. You know, the poor are eating horse meat soup. This is how much it costs to eat horse sausage in Vienna. You know, this is what the people of Paris had to eat during the siege. Uh, this is what nihilists in Russia eat. You know, they share a horse among themselves.*

**Nate Hegyi: But fast forward to today… and in a lot of places outside the US, horse is still on the menu.  In Japan, it’s sliced thin and served as sashimi. In Belgium, you can get horse as a deli meat for sandwiches. Hungary, Iceland, Italy, France - minced, steaks, sausages - you name it.**

*Neal Rockwell: I’m not exactly sure which butcher shop we’re going to but…*

*Justine Paradis: It’s called boujourie Prince Noir*

**Nate Hegyi: We sent our producer Justine Paradise to Montreal, CANADA on a mission to try some horse meat. She brought along her friend Neil Rockwell.**

***Neal Rockwell: Do you guys have smoked horse meat? Only fresh?***

***Looks like we’re going to have to grill this.***

***I’m going to turn on the BBQ - hey siri, set timer for 1:45 seconds***

***It kind of tastes like beef, but bad. Too tough, no fat, it’s like a cheap steak.***

***Justine Paradis: It’s gamey, you shouldn’t compare it to beef.***

***Neal Rockwell: But I am, I find it impossible not to***

**Nate Hegyi: Beef.**

**If - historically - horse was considered “poor people food… beef was the exact opposite.  For centuries, it was considered the food of the wealthy because you needed land to raise them.**

**America had a lot of land, so suddenly this food of the wealthy could become the food of the masses. And it also had this aura about it… that beef makes you strong.**

*John Wayne: I'll have that brand on enough beef to feed the whole country. Good beef for hungry people. Beef to make 'em strong, make 'em grow.*

**Nate Hegyi: But even the American taboo against horse meat has faltered at times. When other meats were hard to come by after World War II, sale of horse meat surged. President Truman even had a nickname… Horse Meat Harry.**

**And before *that…***

*Tolani Francisco: just about everybody will tell you that that natives… we ate horses.*

**That’s Tolani Francisco again.**

*Tolani Francisco: I know that I've talked to a lot of elder Navajos and the native people- In Laguna. We call them Dine. They they said, no, you know what? That's we hunted horses. You know, if a horse went lame, grandmother and grandfather, way back in the day, they didn't waste that protein. They utilized that animal. You, you slaughtered it. You gave thanks to it. You ask its spirit to become part of you. You gave it to the family to use. And you used everything. I mean, bones, feet, hair, hide… everything.*

**Nate Hegyi: I mentioned before that the slaughter or hunting of federally-protected wild horses on public lands is illegal.**

**But that’s not the case on many reservations. And like I said - populations are growing there, too.**

**Tolani believes that management of those herds needs a multi-pronged approach. Yes… Adoption, birth control, sterilization. But also… culling.**

*Tolani Francisco: None of us is ever going to stay alive the rest of our lives. And so when we have to address that method, um, I think that we need to  realize that there we can have life out of death.*

**Nate Hegyi: In 2018, the Navajo Nation tried to do just that. Their wildlife agency said that there were as many as 50,000 free-ranging horses across the reservation. Meanwhile, native species - like elk and mule deer - were struggling, being outcompeted.**

**So officials planned a first of its kind horse hunt on Navajo land.**

**But the proposed hunt set off a firestorm.**

**Activists showed up to protest…**

**And it was eventually canceled by the Navajo Nation president.**

**The irony here is that - even though American laws, and American views on horsemeat have prevented hunts and horse slaughter in the U.S... the killing still happens.**

**It just happens somewhere else.**

**For instance, Some of the folks that adopt those cheap wild horses from the federal government… have then exploited loopholes in the law to send those horses to slaughterhouses in Mexico and Canada.**

**And tribes – who aren’t bound by those same federal laws – they will send some of their free-ranging horses to slaughter in those countries, too.**

**In other words, we hold horses up as a symbol of American freedom… but then we look the other way when the reality doesn’t line up with our ideals. Horse slaughterhouses are effectively banned in the US, because federal law prohibits the USDA from inspecting them… but then we ship horses hundreds or even thousands of miles and pretend like the outcome isn’t the same.**

**Craig Iron Pipe would rather see us dealing with our free-ranging horse problem here in the U.S. – In fact, he’d love to see the Blackfeet export some of their horse meat directly to Europe.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: so right now, I'm in talks with a lady from Italy. And so they eat horse in Italy too. So, you know, but the part is, is trying to learn how we're going to get it there.*

**Nate Hegyi: 80% of Americans *don’t* like the idea of slaughtering horse. So the politics of actually doing this… that’s actually one of the few issues in Congress that *isn’t* divisive.**

**There’s are bipartisan bills moving through the House and Senate that would** [**permanently ban**](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/3475?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22SAFE+Act+wild+horses%22%7D&s=4&r=1) **the slaughter of horses in the U.S. It would also ban the transfer of horses across the border for slaughter, too. A bunch of Democrats AND republicans have signed onto it.**

**They called the slaughter a QUOTE “Gruesome practice.”**

**Even Tucker Carlson has expressed horror at slaughtering horses. He interviewed an activist a couple years ago about it.**

*Tucker Carlson: Of all the things going on in this country that need fixing, is there some reason we need to bother the wild horses in the first place? We have vast reserves of federal lands… why are we hassling the wild horses?*

*Carol Walker: Because the* [*livestock industry*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yls_kK5wh6M) *has a huge amount of power and money and they want all the horses gone.*

**Nate Hegyi: This is an argument, by the way, that you hear a lot. This “wild horse problem” is actually an agriculture problem.**

**That the horses are competing with the millions of non-native cattle that graze on arid lands in the West. Those cows? There are way more of them… they can be just as brutal to the land… and they are a huge contributor to climate change.**

**There are even some advocates and environmentalists who say we are focusing on the wrong non-native species all along.**

**But you don’t see Republicans and Democrats uniting to end the slaughter of cattle. More than two-thirds of Americans eat beef. And Tucker Carlson loves a burger.**

*Tucker Carlson: Build your burger with peanut butter on the bun, a burger, more peanut butter, bacon, then drizzle some honey on it.*

**Sure, a part of this is because the American livestock industry** [**has a lot of power and influence**](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/03/beef-industry-public-relations-messaging-machine)**, but I also think that cows lack something that horses have in spades.**

**A great story.**

**It’s Black Beauty, not Black Bovine. No John Wayne on cowback. Wild, wild cattle… just doesn’t have the same ring to it.**

**Even Craig Iron Pipe struggles with this. On one hand, horses are just another type of meat. On the other hand… they’re not.**

*Craig Iron Pipe: It's a protein. chickens are protein fish is protein cows are protein, pigs are protein. Our bodies need protein, you know?*

*Nate Hegyi: Do you think you’d ever eat horse?*

*Craig Iron Pipe: I was offered horse over there [in Europe], but just from me training them and stuff… there is that bond, you know, I guess if I was starving, I definitely would eat that horse.*

*Nate Hegyi: There was never a history with the Blackfeet of of consuming horse?*

*Craig Iron Pipe: No, we stole horses. (laughs)*

**This episode was written and produced by me, Nate Hegyi, with help from Taylor Quimby, who also edited it.**

**Our team includes Felix Poon and Justine Paradise – thank you for trying horse meat!**

**Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer.**

**You can find a link to Susanna Forrest’s book, “The Age of the Horse,” in our show notes.**

**We’ll also have some links to studies on the origin of horses in North America and how birth control works.**

**Obviously, this is a touchy subject - and we’d love to know what you think. Join our private Facebook group, or send us an email at outsideinradio dot org.**

**Music in this episode was by Blue Dot Sessions. Our theme music is by Breakmaster Cylinder.**

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