

Pushed to the Brink

by Michael Bevilacqua

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I was asked about the future of horses in an interview regarding the book last year and I knew, or know, that things will get worse for horses before they get better. It has already been well underway, at least here in Quebec, with the closing of major race tracks. The closing of those tracks was due to cutting of government funding. Breeders for the industry were left with overstock. They were the source of production for which there is no longer a viable market. It does not end just with business. The financial crunch for all people has seen more and more horses be torn away from their 'families'. Sometimes, trying to give a horse away to a good home is almost impossible. Horse rescues and slaughter houses have been very busy lately.

Such slaughter stats have gone up in Canada but that should be no surprise

since it has been outlawed in the United States. The growing activism for horses is notable, however, changing conditions for transport to slaughter or the abolition of slaughter does not address the source of the problem. It is not a matter of adding more laws to protect horses. The problem is that there has always been a double-standard in our own view toward other animals. Maybe I should write, our view of *other species than our own*, or *other mammals*. At the very least, we can say that we own domesticated horses, but the rules of law, or the term, does not apply in the same way as for a dog or a cat.

It is odd that it has been mentioned to me on occasion on how I interact with my horses is still unjust. While working at liberty, some say that the horses are not really free. True, I only have three acres, but more importantly, I know when a horse says no. It is obvious even in an enclosure that is 100x200 feet (30x61m). More obvious that they can be as free as can be when that enclosure has a 50 foot wide opening (15m).



And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell, and I understood more than I saw

I do my best to live in the way that the world is. Fitting in but feeling like not belonging. I understand what people may be saying. It reminds me of a Lakota perspective from the book, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with an Indian Elder* by Kent Nerburn. It mentions how the white man thinks that everyone lives as they do, or should, and all is fenced in or caged. In all our structure, boundaries and protection, we lose our own freedom.

Saying that we keep domesticated horses in a 'herd' is already a misconception. But, we know to what that refers. We try to keep our horses in a more natural environment and not in stable-like conditions. Free. Who is free? Horses are protected by a few caring souls because the world is dominated by humans. Horses cannot really be set 'free'. All land has been divided into packets. No matter how big, there are boundaries and borders for all of us.

In my interaction with horses it is to keep them healthy, strong, and further develop their thinking abilities. I like to keep things interesting and fun for them. I could just provide a 'prison' and just throw hay over the fence but I want to learn more about them, personally, and likewise, them of me. I can befriend wild deer from the forest in the same way, but they are out there on their own to fend for themselves. They have come to learn that this is a safe place and come to visit. This is both at the same time beautiful and very hard for me. For, I often recognize some of those different deer, dead alongside the road, over the course of the winter.



Elements of Nature Within Us All

I know of one place where horses are left alone and that is Sable Island. This thin strip of sand is 300km south-east of Nova Scotia, Canada. It is a 42km (26 miles) long crescent shape by 1km (0.6 miles) wide. There is no public travel to the island and the horses are protected by these restrictions as long as the Coast Guard maintains a station there. Whether protection is maintained or not, rising sea levels will claim most of the island. The horses are free to live and die all on their own. Population goes up and down according to the severity of seasons. Although they are portrayed as displaying typical, textbook herd behaviour, the horses on the small island share space and water and are generally more tolerant with each other in that sense. Mild winters permit the population to increase but many of the old, very young and weak horses do not survive the next harsh winter. Injuries are often not seen, not that it would make

a difference, and horses can linger to suffer, starve and die even during warmer months.



Horses digging for water in dry season - Sable Island



Surviving winter with scarce food - Sable Island

I invite you to take a look at the photography of the horses of Sable Island by [Roberto Dutesco](#). A fashion photographer who learned to see horses in their true light and shares some incredible experiences. (See *About Chasing Wild Horses* in References below)

There is a distinction between caring for horses in our own created confines and keeping horses for our own needs or uses. In *Beyond the Dream Horse* I wrote about having observed different horses being put through grueling training for the ambitious or personal desires of people. However, the outcome of some unfortunate horses was mostly the same - horses would suffer injuries or be deemed not capable of achieving the desired physical form or end-use. The horse would be tearfully discarded only to be replaced with another who would have to endure a repetition of the exact same sequence of events.

Many people adhere to a particular method without knowing much else about anatomy, physiology, behavior, negative effects of biting, horseshoes, riding or have a general disinterest in science. It is never my intention to demean or berate or lecture people. However, if asked and I were to point out that what a person is doing is based on negative reinforcement (applying an uncomfortable pressure or situation until the horse learns to respond accordingly) that term, 'negative', will insult or upset people. That is often due only to the word itself because many do not understand to what it relates. To be realistic and sympathetic, most people do love their horses and want to believe that they are doing their best in achieving a true bond. Some may brood because they *do* notice something not right in the horse but block it out because of their strong ideological wants.

We believe ourselves to be superior to other species but we have only worked long on developing our intelligence. We are so fragile physically and emotionally. Physical problems are evident and can be addressed but emotions are often suppressed. It is the hidden wounds that linger longer. It is no different with horses.

On the other hand, where I do believe that it is important to gain more knowledge about the horse, some people learn almost everything available about horses and training and healing. It is an on-going process of constant search and information flow that consumes them to the point where they lose the ability for plain, common sense. I give an example in my dvd set of people thinking, cross-referencing and second-guessing themselves for something so simple, that they stand frozen, unable to decide how to react with their horse.

I have seen a young child develop a better relationship with a horse than an educated adult. Horses may even offer a compromise or a solution to children when they figure out what a child may be trying to do or ask.

Information or Knowledge

I opened up last year's International Seminar with a quote that left people somewhat puzzled: It is a Taoist axiom that intellectual scholarship and analytical logic can only serve to dissect and categorize information. Knowledge, different from information is achieved only through knowing. Ultimately, only intuitive understanding can provide wisdom. Truth, while elusive, exists. But, it is obscured by search because purposeful search will inevitably mislead the searcher from truth.

By the end of the seminar, despite ironically being flooded with information, they understood that axiom a little better.

Since awareness and education about horses have increased, there are not as many 'revolving door' horse rescues. We should realize that the reality of horses that are cast out and sent to a safe refuge are being cared for and have a better life than humans who are forced to go to refugee camps. When I had my old website, equiforme.net, I would get an offer to adopt a horse at least once a month. The reasons were always the same. It was rooted in a physical problem: the horse could no longer 'keep up' or just did not perform to win as expected for a variety of disciplines or even just local fairs! It is mainly the mentality and our view of horses that need to change. At times, I have been plainly faced with such old mentality and have suggested to some people that instead of buying horses, they should buy off-road vehicles or bicycles for family fun on the weekend.



From an ad on Craigslist... 'he is well broke for any level of rider' but needs a new home

A major ingredient in the mix recently is the economy. Horse owners may find other things on which to cut back and bartering has made a little of a comeback. A lot in our world simply requires cash. In the past couple of years people have been forced to give up their horses due to financial strain, loss of jobs and foreclosures on homes. It's a heartbreaking, man-made disaster. People and horses suffer both physically and emotionally.

Rose Gergely, of Refuge RR, in Alexandria, Ontario, Canada, cares for horses and all kinds of other animals totalling over 400. She states that there has been an increase of horses being *abused*.

Rose explains, "Now, is that because of publicity and we are hearing about it more or are people actually getting crueler? I think it is both. We have had non-stop calls for situations of cruelty from across Canada."

It is because of their main concern about the welfare of the horse that they can take in horses that other rescues will not touch. Refuge RR believes in giving horses a life beyond what they can do for humans. Some horses that have suffered serious neglect, trauma, or abuse find a permanent home at Refuge RR and are supported through sponsorship. Numbers are up everywhere. All are in need of food, labor and funding.



Photo taken by Metod Kolla at Refuge RR - www.refugerr.org

In cases of abuse or neglect, most people find such reports reprehensible. Having a horse or any other animal requires, at least, a certain level of responsibility. In the cases that we hear about, the perpetrators do not see anything wrong at all. They believe that they have every right and animals have no rights. Yet, most try to hide what they do. Laws exist for neglect, assault, torture and murder in the human world. It does not stop people from doing those things to each other. The important changes must come from within ourselves,

nurtured within the family and society. Those sad stories being more prominent in the news reflects a heightened awareness and the need for change. Such changes are happening around the world.

When I leave my little green corner and venture out, I feel like an alien in a strange world and very far from home. Yet, I am happier when I turn my focus to where I see that so much more is possible. It is not a utopic world that I long for somewhere, someday. Mystery and beauty is already unveiled in plain sight. It was the stillness of the forest and the horses that showed me the way.

*I do not think the measure of a civilization
is how tall its buildings of concrete are,
But rather how well its people have learned to relate
to their environment and fellow man.*

- Sun Bear of the Chippewa Tribe



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