



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island
National Seashore

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Assateague Island National Seashore News Release

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National Park Service to Hold Public Open House on New Strategies for Managing the Feral Horses of Assateague Island National Seashore

Assateague Island National Seashore, Berlin, Maryland – Superintendent Scott J. Bentley announced today that a public open house will be held on Tuesday June 10, 2008 from 6:00 to 8:00 PM to present the results of an environmental assessment (EA) of alternatives for managing the Feral Horses of Assateague Island National Seashore. This planning document describes several new strategies that are being proposed to improve management of the Assateague horses and better protect their island home. The meeting will be held at the park's Barrier Island Visitor Center on Route 611 near Berlin, Maryland.

The feral horses of Assateague Island National Seashore (ASIS) are the park's most well known natural resource. Thousands of visitors are attracted to Assateague each year to view free-roaming horses in a natural barrier island setting. The park's 1982 General Management Plan recognized the significance of the horses and directed that they be managed as a "desirable feral species" within the context of the park's overall purposes. When ASIS acquired ownership of the horses in 1968, the herd numbered around 28. By 2000, the population had grown to more than 170. Through the use of contraceptives (since 1994), the population has since been reduced to around 140.

Research has demonstrated that a too-large population of horses greatly influences the distribution and abundance of many native plants, including several rare and threatened species, and alters the dynamics of plant community composition and succession. Over-grazing has also been shown to reduce biodiversity, and to disrupt important natural processes such as dune formation and stabilization. Although the horses are an important part of the Assateague visitor experience, there is a need to manage the population in ways that will both provide for the long-term health of the herd as well as minimize adverse impacts to other park resources and values.

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In 2006, ASIS enlisted the expertise of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group of the IUCN - the World Conservation Union - to conduct a Population and Habitat Viability Analysis (PHVA) in which stakeholders and the NPS analyzed the interrelated and opposing goals of balancing ecosystem and horse population health. The effort identified an optimum horse population size of 80-100, as well as several potential strategies to consider in future feral horse management. Stakeholders participating in the PHVA included the Humane Society of the United States and the American Horse Protection Association.

The EA evaluates four possible alternatives for managing the horse population, and analyzes the potential environmental and social consequences of each. Alternative A is the No Action Alternative, which would continue the current management program and practices, and maintain the horse population at around 150. Alternatives B, C and D (the action alternatives) all propose a reduction in population size to the PHVA recommended range of 80-100 horses. The three action alternatives differ from one another in the means by which the population goal is achieved (one-time removal versus intensive contraception), the time frame (2 years versus 5 - 8 years), and how the population is subsequently managed (closed population versus periodic additions/removals to optimize herd health).

The public open house will provide information about the horses, the management challenges, and the proposed new strategies for future management. Park staff will be on hand to answer questions and receive comments. **The National Park Service encourages and welcomes comments on the Horse Management EA.** Copies are available for review prior to the workshop at park headquarters, 7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, MD, and at the Ocean Pines Library, the Snow Hill Library, and the Wicomico County Library in Salisbury, Maryland. The document is also available on the web at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov> (search for Assateague Island National Seashore). Comments must be postmarked no later than July 11, 2008, and should be mailed to Carl Zimmerman, 7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, MD 21811 or faxed to (410) 641-1099. Comments can also be submitted electronically at the web site: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov> (search for Assateague Island National Seashore and follow instructions for submitting comments).

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