BEHIND THE SCENES AT CHINCOTEAGUE

The Death Toll Rises

T here were about 40 to 50 horses in the pen. They all looked very stressed," recalled Jan Spink, a therapeutic riding instructor from central Virginia. Ms. Spink was on her way to the beach when she stopped to observe pony-handling procedures during Chincoteague's annual pony penning roundup. "Then I noticed that I mare was down," she continued. "She wasn't looking right.

"I went to the firemen [who sponsor the roundup], there were about a dozen of them standing around. None of them had noticed the pony, so I pointed her out and said that she was in severe distress and needed a vet immediately." I watched for about ten minutes, assuming the fire company had a competent system in place for veterinary emergencies. I assumed that everybody was running to get things for the mare. I assumed wrong. Nobody seemed to be doing anything to help her. I valued time was being wasted. "I finally said, 'You've got to get a vet!' They said, 'We tried. No vet will come.'"

The next thing Jan Spink knew was that the fire company officials were bringing a veterinarian therapist to the corral site. "Outside of myself, she was the only person with any knowledge of horses," Ms. Spink explained. "Completely overwhelmed, I had been standing there in confusion, telling the crowd the pony was about to give birth. The pony wasn't even pregnant. 'Meanwhile, the pony was overheating in the direct sunlight, and nobody was doing anything. That's when I finally jumped the fence.'"

Ms. Spink began directing efforts to save the pony. She radioed for assistance, said Ms. Spink, "He told us he had a parking lot full of clients and couldn't be disturbed. "We have a pony that's going into deep shock," he said. He said wouldn't refuse treat ment if the mare was brought to his office."

Eventually, the animal, unable even to move its legs or hold its head up, was dragged into a horse trailer and carted away. "I thought they were taking her to a vet," said Jan Spink, "but they took her to a shady area of the carnival grounds." A veterinarian, contacted by phone, had suggested that she be taken to a shady place and given some water. When the pony failed to rally, it was trucked north to the Virginia/Maryland line where a third veterinarian, licensed to practice only in Maryland, agreed to meet and treat the animal. Deeply disturbed over the disor ganized rescue effort, he was forced to administer treatment to the dying animal in 102 degree heat in the back of the horse trailer.

"Not surprisingly, these efforts were as futile as they were heroic. Adequate veterinary care came too late for that pony, just as it did for another 5 mares that were killed in the last two years—the victims of Chincoteague's famous pony penning.

Fire Company
$40,000, Ponies $0

Each year, during the last week in July, the tiny island town of Chincoteague, Virginia, is thrust into the national spotlight as tens of thousands of spectators converge to participate in pony-penning events. Scores of newborn foals, mistakenly thought to be descended from ponies swept overboard from a Spanish ship 150 years ago, are auctioned to bidders in a time-honored tradition that dates back sixty-four years.

Asstategue Island, a thirty-seven-mile spit off the Maryland/Virginia shore, is the home to roughly 300 ponies—animals that have made the successful transition to life in a marine environment. These horses live in an exiguous habitat, enduring everything from temperature extremes to heavy mosquito and tick infestation. Consuming a variety of grasses in Assateague's marshlands, the ponies manage to flush the excess salt from their systems by drinking the fresh water they find in rain puddles and springs.

A herd of about 150 ponies inhabits the Virginia lower third of Assateague Island, living quietly in the salt marshes of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Although they are described as "wild," these 150 ponies are actually owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company. Each year, that organization pays $810 to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and is granted a special-use permit to graze its ponies on the federal refuge. As long as the ponies do not pose a threat to the island's unique ecology, the FWS tolerates their presence and enjoys the added attraction they represent to refuge visitors.

In what is billed as a management tool necessary to thicken the Chincoteague herd, each year, the fire company sells off most of the herd's newborn foals, a tradition that, twenty years ago, brought the fire company a few thousand dollars, but, today, has become a much more lucrative event. This year, with a total of 77 foals selling for an average of $600 a piece, pony penning added a whopping $40,000 to the firemen's coffers. Despite the record take, most of the monies raised during pony penning come not from the sale of ponies but rather from the booming tourist trade that accompanies the event.

Pony penning gets underway Sunday, as firemen on horseback begin to round up and corral the refuge's ponies, separating the stallions from mares and foals. On Wednesday, with crowds of spectators lining the barns, mares and foals are forced to swim across a channel separating Assateague Island and the refuge from the seaside town of Chincoteague. Once they reach the opposite bank, the ponies are given a short rest, then herded down Main Street to Chincoteague's carnival grounds. Thursday morning, foals are taken from their mothers and auctioned off to spectators; foal-less mares make the swim back to freedom on Friday.

It's not only the festivities associated with pony penning, but also the complaints. The HSUS receives each year that have become part of the annual tradition. For more than two decades, HSUS investigators have monitored pony penning activities, recording a multitude of abuses ranging from the sale of day-old foals and the manhandling of newborns to the shipment of newly purchased ponies—their legs tied tightly together—in the backseats of Volkswagons and Jeeps. "Wild pony rides," in which mares, just separated from their foals, are forced to endure bronc riding by local cowboy-types, are also part of the show.

While negotiations with the fire company have resulted in some improvements (company officials no longer sell day-old foals, transportation standards have been upgraded, and foal-care packets are distributed to buyers by the HSUS and the American Horse Protection Association), problems continue to plague the operation, the result of the expedient and highly stressful fashion in which the herd is handled and managed. Impulse buying by spectators with no knowledge of the specialized care horses require is common.

1988: Four Mares Collapse

Last summer, a new threat to resident ponies surfaced when, shortly after rounding up and corraling the ponies, part of the herd became gravely ill and lapsed into shock. It would be weeks before autopsies revealed that the ponies had consumed island vegetation toxic to their systems, vegetation that would ultimately cause cyanide poisoning in the mares.

Although the pony deaths were kept under wraps by the fire company, information about the tragedy was leaked to The HSUS by an anonymous phone caller. Part-time officials operating during pony penning revealed that 4 mares had died, and,
When the first 2 ponies collapsed, no veterinarian was present, and the fire company made no attempt to obtain the services of one. "The horses' jaws became locked, they couldn't stand up, and they were burning up," recalled a former FWS employee. "I phoned the fire company's veterinarian at his office but he said he was tied up in surgery and couldn't come." The FWS employee spent four long hours on the phone trying to locate a veterinarian who would come to examine 2 more mares that had gone down in the interim. By the time she located one, rescue efforts were futile; all 4 animals eventually died what were described as very painful deaths. (The legislature, who later performed autopsy on 2 of the mares explained that, in the wild, the ponies would not have eaten the toxic vegetation, consuming primarily island grasses. When forced into the extremely stressful conditions of the roundup, however, they apparently did so, with fatal consequences.)

The HSUS finds it inconceivable that the FWS was left to bear the responsibility of locating a veterinarian for the ponies in a time of dire need, when corralled mares were mysteriously dying and no veterinarian was available to examine the herd," said HSUS Investigator Gail Eistinitz in a letter to the FWS last year. "The fact that a FWS employee spent four hours on the telephone every day for 5 days trying to locate veterinary assistance is a clear indication of the fire company's indifference to the welfare of its charges.

Additional investigation by The HSUS revealed that the fire company has no significant mechanism in place to monitor or care for injured or dying animals on Chincoteague NWR year round. In fact, a biologist who conducted extensive research on the refuge informed The HSUS that, in the past, when injured or ill animals were brought to the fire company's attention, they were simply dragged from public view and left to die. There have also been allegations of kickings and drownings of disabled horses as well.

As a result of last year's deaths, The HSUS requested that the FWS include a special provision in the fire company's grazing permit requiring that an on-site licensed veterinarian be present during the entire pony-penning operation. Last November, we received word from the FWS that our request had been approved and a special condition had been inserted into the fire company's permit. It was a small step, but we were delighted to know that, after sixty-three years, the fire company would at last be held accountable in some fashion for the welfare of its ponies, even if only during pony-penning week.

1989: Two Mares Die

On the morning of July 27, 1989, one year to the day after the first two mares died, Jan Spink tried to save 1 of 2 mares that would die this year. Despite the 1988 tragedy, despite the stipulation in its grazing permit, the fire company again had not arranged to have a veterinarian on site, nor could company officials locate one anywhere.

After last year's deaths, we find it inconceivable that the fire company did not make arrangements to have a veterinarian present at [July's] events," explained HSUS President John A. Hoyt in a recent letter to Chincoteague NWR Manager John Schroer. More disturbing, Mr. Hoyt explained, was the fact that after the death of the first mare this year, still no significant effort was made by fire company officials to obtain the services of a veterinarian. Mr. Hoyt urged the refuge manager to take strong disciplinary action against the fire company for the blatant violation of its grazing permit.

"This is the second successive year that we have autopsied ponies lost due to stress-related activities," wrote Dr. Ralph C. Knowles, the Maryland Department of Agriculture veterinarian with whom 3 of the 6 dead ponies ultimately ended up. "It is obvious that the husbandry and level of veterinary care have been inadequate during the last two roundups, pennings, and auctions," he continued in a letter to the Chincoteague refuge manager. Dr. Knowles described the heavy infestation of ticks and internal parasites plaguing the ponies he autopsied and suggested the establishment of a carefully planned program of care for Chincoteague's ponies. "My proposal here may seem ambitious, but I believe it can be carried out in a commonsense manner. Hopefully, these changes could lead to better husbandry... and stop the death losses in the pony population with its attendant bad publicity."" John Schroer has vowed to add new stipulations to next year's grazing permit, requiring a veterinarian to "check in" with the FWS each day of pony penning. This year, however, in an effort to prevent negative attention from being drawn to the refuge, the FWS has decided not to impose any penalties on the fire company; the company's permit will not be revoked or suspended nor will fire officials be fined for their flagrant violation of their special-use permit. For this reason, we urge our members to write the Interior Department's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, with a copy to Chincoteague NWR Manager Schroer, demanding that the FWS take strong disciplinary action against the fire company by imposing a stiff fine and making it clear that the company's expedient treatment of ponies for profit will no longer be tolerated. After all, any organization that netted $46,000 from the sale of foals that inhabit a taxpayer-funded refuge can certainly afford to pay a fine for its negligent actions affecting stock. In addition to a fine, explain that, if the FWS does not intend to revoke the fire company's grazing permit, you need the fire company put on probationary status. You might mention that the only negative publicity you foresee from this incident is the result from the FWS's inaction not to hold the fire company accountable for what is a clear violation of its special-use permit.

Write: The Honorable Constance B. Harriman, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife, Department of the Interior, 18th and C Streets, NW, Washington, DC 20240 and Mr. John Schroer, Refuge Manager, Chincoteague NWR, P.O. Box 62, Chincoteague, VA 23336.

WHAT'S A CHINCOTEAGUE PONY?

No one really knows where Chincoteague ponies came from or how they came to dwell on Assateague Island. While legends exist that they were descended from the survivors of a sixteenth-century shipwreck, some scientists believe that the Chincoteague's ancestors actually descend from stock of early colonialists who permitted their animals to roam freely about the island. What we do know is that the Chincoteague ponies are not the purebreds—with bloodlines dating back 350 years—that the public has been led to believe. In fact, time and again off-island blood has been introduced to the herd. Reports from the early 1900s tell us that Shetland ponies were imported to the island and subsequently bred with resident stock. As recently as 1982, when the herd was swept to sea in a devastating storm, outside stock was introduced to help replenish the herd. In recent years, new stud animals—particularly mustangs, Spanish barbs, and Arabians—have been imported by the fire company to upgrade the herd and add new blood. (Why does the fire company find it necessary to add horses to the herd, when the annual sale of these mares is supposedly conducted to reduce the number of ponies on the refuge?) Each year, scores of unsuspecting buyers shell out hundreds of dollars for so-called Chincoteague ponies. Such foals are often in extremely poor condition at the time of sale.

"I saw the foal two weeks ago that was brought back from the island," recalled a member of the (now defunct) Assateague Island Preservation Society. The HSUS. He described the filthy condition of a two-month-old foal that was anemic, dehydrated, and suffering from internal and external parasites. The HSUS requested that the FWS include a special provision in the fire company's grazing permit requiring a veterinarian to check in with the FWS each day of pony penning. This year, however, in an effort to prevent negative attention from being drawn to the refuge, the FWS has decided not to impose any penalties on the fire company; the company's permit will not be revoked or suspended nor will fire officials be fined for their flagrant violation of their special-use permit. For this reason, we urge our members to write the Interior Department's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, with a copy to Chincoteague NWR Manager Schroer, demanding that the FWS take strong disciplinary action against the fire company for the blatant violation of its grazing permit. The veterinarian reported, "the foal died." Weaned too early, stressed, suffering from encephalitis, and in poor nutritional shape, the foal had three strikes against it before it even had a chance to live. Chincoteague ponies, often also suffering from internal and external parasites, have difficulty adapting to unsuitable conditions to the Chincoteague ponies, often also suffering from internal and external parasites, have difficulty adapting to unsuitable conditions