

Bandelier

Administrative History

CHAPTER 6: NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN MESA AND CANON COUNTRY (continued)

Increasing sophistication in the sciences also prompted new directions in natural resource management. For many years, natural resource management and protection had been synonymous. Resource managers simply preserved; they suppressed fires, protected flora and fauna from damage, and arrested poachers. But as the concept of the dynamics of ecological communities gained credence, scientists began to view the natural world from a different perspective. Sophisticated techniques offered a way to move into new realms of management. During the 1960s and 1970s, the genetic diversity of the planet became an important cultural issue, and the scientific public and the environmental community came to regard the park system as the best collection of natural diversity. New ideas of this nature hastened the implementation of up-to-the-minute scientific programs.

This led to a broadening of the range of responsibilities for resource managers within the agency. In the early 1970s, Chief Scientist Roland Wauer of the Southwestern Region implemented a program to assess the natural attributes of cultural areas. Armed with the latest scientific knowledge and technique, natural resource managers began to look at archeological and historical parks. [3]

Beginning in the early 1970s, this translated into more prominent interest in the natural resources of Bandelier. Rather than simply focusing on the cultural resources of the monument, the Park Service began looking at the natural resources of the undeveloped backcountry. Increasingly attuned to preservation responsibilities and spurred by the interest in the designated wilderness area, in 1973-74 the Park Service began designing a comprehensive resource management plan for Bandelier.

The new plan represented a departure from previous practices at the monument. Until the 1970s, concern for natural resources played a secondary role in the management of the park. The Park Service regarded Bandelier primarily as an archeological area. The proclamation establishing the monument did not refer to its natural attributes, Frank Pinkley paid little attention to the backcountry, and the postwar influx of visitors precluded attention to other issues. Despite the fact that the CCC workers cut trails and did some maintenance, there was little evidence of a coherent plan of natural resource management.

Prior to the 1970s, the Park Service simply reacted to most natural resource questions. When a problem occurred, the staff at the monument dealt with it as best they could. During the 1930s, webworms threatened the trees in Frijoles Canyon, and the custodian developed an eradication program. When small fires broke out, staff members rushed to put them out. A major windstorm damaged trees in 1952,

and the agency responded by clearing out the downed timber. Despite frequent inspections, such isolated incidents comprised the extent of natural area management at Bandelier. Archeology and the needs of visitors simply superseded the management of the Bandelier backcountry. [4]

The feral burros that inhabited the backcountry offered the issue on which the need for natural resource management at the monument focused. The presence of the burros preceded NPS administration at Bandelier, but the first Park Service wildlife inspection in 1934 did not mention them. In 1940, however, NPS biologist W. B. McDougall saw approximately twenty during his visit. He recommended that the burros be eliminated, and later that year the regional office approved the first burro control plan for the Bandelier Monument. Slowly, the plan became practice. In September, 1946, rangers shot fifty-two burros, halving the population at the monument. In October and November, 1946, twelve more were destroyed, and burro eradication became policy at Bandelier.

Feral burros became a perennial issue at the monument. After a long period in which other issues diminished the importance of the burros, a "Long Range Wildlife and Range Management Plan," prepared in 1964, initiated new action. The plan recommended that rangers use high-powered rifles to eliminate burros in the higher elevations of the monument. The program also suggested trapping burros at watering holes throughout the backcountry.

In the fall of 1964, the Park Service hired the Los Alamos County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol to hunt burros at the monument. Despite confident predictions, they caught few animals. The rough terrain of the Bandelier backcountry thwarted the mounted hunters. Trapping agile burros in open canyons and mesas while on horseback was not an easy task.

With a mandate to eliminate exotic animals from park areas, agency personnel continued to try to get rid of the burros at Bandelier. In December 1966, rangers observed fifty-eight burros, and visitors reported twenty more. At about the same time, backcountry inspections reported damage to above-ground ruins and increased soil erosion. After viewing the evidence, the staff at the monument decided that there was a correlation between burro grazing and increased soil erosion, particularly in the vast area southwest of Alamo Canyon. The burros ceased to be merely unattractive residents of the backcountry. They became a menace to its ecological and archeological values.

In 1969, Superintendent Stanley T. Albright drew plans to combat the increasing numbers of burros. The plan reported that one hundred burros ranged over three-fourths of the 23,000-acre backcountry, and Albright advocated burro elimination by any available means. Despite his proposal and general acceptance of the idea that the burros had to be removed from the backcountry, there were no burro eliminations between 1969 and 1972. Additional sightings were reported, however, in 1970 and 1971, and the staff estimated the monument population at between fifty and two hundred animals.

The passage of the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971 complicated the management of burros within the national park system. The law protected wild horses and burros on BLM and Department of Agriculture (U.S. Forest Service) land. Soon the number of burros on the national forest land adjacent to Bandelier increased, and some crossed the boundary into the monument. The Park Service had to contend with a growing herd of burros in the Bandelier backcountry.

The burros posed a problem for the agency. Although NPS lands were exempt from the jurisdiction of the Wild Horse and Burro Act, the Park Service policy of removing exotic animals that altered ecosystems from park areas offended animal advocacy groups. [5] The agency needed to devise a strategy that removed the burros and did not hurt its public image. For regional office and park staff, the burro issue became a no-win situation. No matter what stance the agency took, portions of its constituency were sure to resent its actions.

At Bandelier, the Park Service found itself "working on a natural problem," Fletcher remarked, "to protect a cultural resource." Many park employees suspected that the burros were responsible for much of the damage to archeological sites in the backcountry. Erosion in the backcountry had increased to an estimated thirty-six tons of soil per acre per year, an astonishingly high rate that threatened unexcavated archeological sites.

The Park Service started "from the beginning" in its efforts to assess the affect of the burros on the monument. The agency hired professional researchers, including John R. Morgart of Arizona State University, to determine the extent of the damage caused by the animals. Morgart's study offered a catalogue of the sins of the burro. A non-native species, burros had a profound impact on the ecosystems of the backcountry. Burros and deer competed for the same food during winter months, and the burros were so successful that USFS Supervisor John Hall complained to NPS Regional Director Frank Kowski that the they were destroying deer habitat throughout the region. The evidence piled up against the burros. With a mandate to preserve the resources of the monument, there was little choice. The animals had to go. [6]

Between 1974 and 1977, the Natural Resources Division of the Southwest Region spent \$130,000 on burro research and removal at Bandelier. In the process, the Park Service removed 130 burros, but its research showed that the agency barely held its own. The proximity of the protected burro herds on Forest Service and BLM land and the imperfect fencing on the western and southern boundaries of the monument allowed a constant ingress of burros. The animals also proved to have an astonishing rate of reproduction--29 percent. A rate of 25 percent meant that burro population doubled every fourth year. The Park Service seemed unable to win the battle, and what had been an issue became a crisis. [7]

During the summer of 1977, the La Mesa fire provided an opportunity to reduce the burro population at Bandelier substantially. During the third day of the week-long fire, Fletcher explained to Regional Director John Cook that the fire offered an "excellent opportunity to remove burros." Fletcher indicated that by destroying seventy-five to one hundred animals, the Park Service could nearly eliminate burros from the monument. After the fire, park staff members saw that the fire had driven deer out of their summer range, and deer and burros competed for the same forage. From the perspective of the Park Service, there was little doubt which animal was more desirable. Cook approved Fletcher's suggestion. Fletcher brought in a crew of "steady men," many of whom previously had worked at Bandelier and knew its canyons and mesas. He did not have to worry about them getting lost in mesa and cañon country. During the week that followed the fire, they shot sixty-six burros. [8]

But an intemperate remark cost the Park Service some public support. During the fire, a reporter spoke with Roland Wauer about the burro eradication program. During the conversation, the reporter wondered if shooting the animals bothered park rangers who primarily sought to preserve resources. Wauer responded by acknowledging the difficulty of the job, but also asserted that Park Service people were professionals who understand that unpleasant tasks were part of their obligation. Besides, he remarked casually, "our people don't suffer from the Bambi complex." The press seized on the remark, and it made headlines in a number of western newspapers. The public image of the Park Service suffered. [9]

After the fire, burro eradication efforts continued. In 1979, the Park Service reviewed its original alternatives from 1976 in an Environmental Assessment of the burro issue and found that it had no other options. The agency started a public review period that ended on March 7, 1980. The eradication program resumed, and on March 12-13, thirty-seven burros were shot.

The eradication program bothered animal advocacy groups such as the Fund for Animals, Inc. (FFA).

An association devoted to protecting wild and domestic animals, the Fund for Animals believed that there was a better way to solve the problem. Nor were its members strangers to the burro issue. When burros posed a problem at the Grand Canyon National Park, the organization proposed a solution that led to the successful removal of many of the burros there. After the animals were captured, they were put up for private adoption. The project solved the burro problem at the Grand Canyon and attracted favorable media attention.

Flushed with success, the Fund for Animals wanted the opportunity to try similar tactics at Bandelier. They and two other animal advocacy groups, the American Horse Protection Association and a small group from Tucson, the Animal Defense Council, filed a suit against the Park Service. On March 13, the Albuquerque District Court enjoined the Park Service from continuing the eradication program. The three-day reduction program, however, had already ended before the restraining order was served on Superintendent John D. Hunter.



During the 1970s, feral burros became a major environmental problem at Bandelier. Roaming the backcountry, they damaged both the cultural and natural resources of the monument. The Park Service spent large sums on studies, control, capture, and eradication of the burros. This photograph suggests the elusive quality of the animals.

Park Service strategists had to grapple with the lawsuit before the burro reduction could continue. The Fund for Animals, their allies, and the Park Service reached an agreement that allowed the FFA an opportunity to implement a live-capture program at the monument. The Fund for Animals subsequently withdrew from the suit, and after representatives of the Animal Defense Council failed to appear in court, the American Horse Protective Association became the sole plaintiff. The defections weakened the suit considerably. On August 18, 1980, the Federal district court in Albuquerque overturned the restraining order, and in December 1982, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver dismissed the suit. In early 1983, the Park Service made plans to proceed with its program.

Under the terms of the agreement with the Fund for Animals, FFA began its efforts to remove the burros from the monument. In May 1983, two cowboys from Bishop, California, arrived at the monument. In the company of a backcountry ranger, they tried to rope burros, and caught one. They followed with attempts to catch the burros in a foot snare, a snare hidden in small hole into which they hoped the burros would walk. They caught only two or three more. After two weeks, the two cowboys withdrew.

The Fund for Animals then brought in Dave Erickson, an Arizona cowboy who had been responsible for their success at Grand Canyon. He used dogs to hold the burros at bay while his crew roped the animals. This novel approach netted more burros than previous efforts, but even with increased success, the removal of burros from Bandelier looked to be an arduous process. The closed box canyons within Grand Canyon National Park made catching burros a relatively easy task. Pilots chased the animals up the canyon until the burros ran out of room. Trapped against a three-sided canyon, the animals were easy to capture. But as the members of the Los Alamos County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol discovered in their effort to trap burros in 1964, the canyons in Bandelier National Monument were open-ended. In the canyons, the agile animals escaped their captors regularly.

Many in the Park Service believed that Erickson imported burros to fulfill his contract. As the height of tourist season approached, park rangers could not stay with Erickson as closely as they had with the earlier cowboys. Soon the burro corral on Frijoles Mesa began to fill. But there was one problem: most of the animals in the corral were tan with a dark cross running down their spine and across their shoulders. They were unlike any burros ever found in Bandelier, not at all similar to the larger black animals previously seen at Bandelier. "If those weren't Arizona burros, mister," Dr. Milford R. Fletcher later exclaimed, "then I've never seen one!"

Others in the Park Service called the burros "ringers," and they had plenty of circumstantial evidence to support their feelings. One park staff member arose at 2 AM and waited all night on Highway 4 in hope of catching a truckload of burros on their way to the corral on Frijoles Mesa. Seasonal Ranger Kevin Rodgers observed an Erickson horse trailer coming to the park late one evening, but did not realize its significance until too late. He also spoke with Erickson by telephone in his motel room around 11:00 PM the evening before the burros appeared in the corral. Since the animals appeared by 5:00 AM, so Erickson supposedly caught between fifteen and eighteen burros in unfamiliar country, along miles of backcountry trails, in less than six hours. No one succeeded in proving that Erickson did anything improper, but the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming.

Nevertheless, the origin of the burros was not an issue for the Park Service. The transaction between FFA and its contractor did not involve the agency. "The Fund for Animals made the deal," Fletcher pointed out nearly a decade later, "the Park Service was just letting them do it." Shortly afterward, Fund for Animals officials asserted that the twenty-nine burros they had captured, included at least sixteen whose status was termed "controversial," were the last in the monument. Claiming its work completed, the Fund for Animals left Bandelier, giving tacit approval to further agency programs to reduce the burro population in the monument. [10] The Park Service continued its eradication policy, shooting an additional twenty-two burros. The park also received money to rehabilitate its fences along the western boundary of monument, adjacent to the protected burro range on national forest land. By the end of 1983, there were few left within the monument.

