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Gezaghebber van Bonaire , Dhr. E. Rijna
Bestuurscollege van Bonaire
Wilhelminaplein 1
Kralendijk,
Bonaire

Dear Honorable Governor Rijna and Executive council Members,

I write on behalf of many groups—'We Care for Bonaire', 'Citizens for a Better Safer Animal Friendly Bonaire', 'BICEPS Bonaire' and the 'Bonaire Donkey Protection League'—that are concerned about the fate of the donkeys that live on Bonaire. Worldwide, free-ranging species represent a challenge for governments trying to be supportive of its citizens that want to keep wildlands natural and those that feel otherwise and want to limit the reach of the natural world into human populated environments. Balancing the tug of these two constituent groups is a challenge, one that as an ecologist I've encountered many times. From my experience, understanding the ecology of the situation helps provide the knowledge that is essential for developing actions that can satisfy competing desires. Before any decisions are taken that affect the fate of the donkeys, stepping back and supporting research can be very beneficial. Before I propose a way forward, I will introduce myself.

I am a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at Princeton University. My research is varied (a ling to CV is provided below), but much of it focuses on understanding the social and population dynamics of equids—horses, zebras and asses—and how they impact humans and their livelihoods. For decades I've studied a population of feral horses on a barrier island off the North Carolina coast that is managed by the US National Parks Service. I've also studied truly wild Prwezwalski horses in China, plains and Grevy's zebras in the drylands of northern Kenya and wild asses in the Israeli Negev desert. In all cases I've unraveled fundamental rules governing the social, population and movement dynamics of these equids. But I've also worked with people that have been impacted by the activities of these free-ranging equid species. I've engaged pastoral herders in Kenya and China to help gather data on the activities of their local equid species and as a result, they have developed sustainable action plans that minimize harm and improve livelihoods. I've also worked with ranchers, both commercial and pastoral, to better understand how cattle and zebras actually help each other when using a common landscape. In the US I've worked with park service scientists and the foundation of Shackleford horses to develop co-management strategies for the feral horses and the ecosystem they impact. I've also served on the National Research Council's committee to assess the Bureau of Land Management's actions associated with managing the herds of free-ranging horses roaming on its western lands. In Israel we have just begun working with Bedouin herders to assess how their herds are impacting the wild asses sharing a common landscape. As you can see I have decades of experience studying the behavior and ecology of equids around the world. In addition, I have have championed designing appropriate research projects that help people with strong feelings for or against free-ranging equids to better understand how equids and other herbivores use and impact the environment. Armed with these understandings, creative management plans can be developed that minimizes harm while preserving free-ranging, but controlled populations.

Until I actually see the landscape and see how the donkeys forage, drink and move, I do not want to offer specific suggestions. But in general, if a population is increasing its range and moving into populated areas it is possible to enhance and enrich the availability of a critical resource so that the population doesn't move into populated areas. If the key resource is water—as it usually is for wild asses—then bolstering water supplies in the center of the range often reduces expansive movements; this has worked in Kenya with respect to Grevy's zebras. Reducing numbers and controlling population growth rate—via contraception as has been done in North Carolina—also reduces overconsumption of resources. And if resource levels remain high, then expansive ranging is usually curtailed. And until such actions take effect, judicious placement of 'speed bumps' at locations where studies reveal where donkeys cross roads will often reduce collisions with cars. These are just some of the efective interventions that have reduced wildlife-human conflict elsewhere. Whether or not they might be effectively employed to control the population dynamics and movements of Bonaire's donkeys will require study.

I stand ready to help design and carry out such studies. I do so because I have been impressed by the openness of the non-profit grass root organizations that support the existence of a self-sustaining free-ranging population of donkeys. From discussions with the leaders of these groups, I am convinced that they will stand by the results of impartial scientific studies and that they will support managing the donkey populations and their landscapes to reduce conflict with people. The leaders of these groups understand that uncontrolled populations are problematic, but they also are searching for interventions that are minimally intrusive. My experience shows me that these twin goals are possible, but only if the dynamics of the donkey populations and their ecosystems are better understood.

I hope that you will delay making any decisions on the fate of donkeys for now and support gathering appropriate data to inform future decisions about the fate of Bonaire's donkeys. I will be happy to answer any questions you have, so feel free to contact me. And as noted above, I and members of my research group, stand ready to assist you and the various stakeholders that have concerns about the donkeys design studies that will provide data to shape future decisions. Knowledge is a powerful policy tool, but unfortunately, not enough is currently known to identify actions that are likely to minimize harm to people, donkeys and their landscape.

Yours sincerely,

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