

Mustang Camp: Promoting Healthy Lands and Healthy Horses

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Need statement

Wild horse and burrow (WHB) management has been a contentious issue in the western U.S. for many decades. Previous research identified public misconceptions about the biology, ecology, and environment impacts of WHBs (Frey 2022). Opinions on WHB management that are uninformed are more likely to conflict politically with viable, science-based management options. **Our program goals were to 1) develop a youth WHB engagement model and 2) quantify changes in WHB knowledge and attitudes towards their management due to participation.**



Figure 1 Youth participants observing wild horse grazing and behavior on-range in Utah's Onaqui Herd Management Area managed by BLM.

Introduction

WHBs are not native to the Americas and, due to their unique ecology, can have negative consequences on rangelands. With fewer natural limiting factors (e.g., predators, competition, etc.) than native grazers, populations can quickly surpass carrying capacity and damage range resources. Populations have surpassed national herd objectives (Appropriate Management Level) by more than 300% and by 200% in Utah. We implemented an experiential youth outreach program to teach participants science-based facts to inform their opinions about these Western cultural icons.

Methods

- Five content experts taught cross-disciplinary aspects of WHB (equine science, wildlife population dynamics, range science).
- The program consists of classroom “science” sessions, herd viewing, a holding facility visit, in-field range science demos, discussions with private landowners, and local politicians (Fig. 1).
- Two-day camps were offered during 2021-22 (three total).
- Youth were recruited across a diversity of locations.
- A 24-question knowledge test and opinion assessment was completed by youth participants both pre- and post-program.

Impacts and results

- 56 youth participants from a diversity of backgrounds attended.
- Average knowledge test scores increased by 42.71%.
- Opinion assessments trended towards more population intervention efforts by management agencies (Fig. 2).
- In 2022, camp social media posts had over 40,000 views.

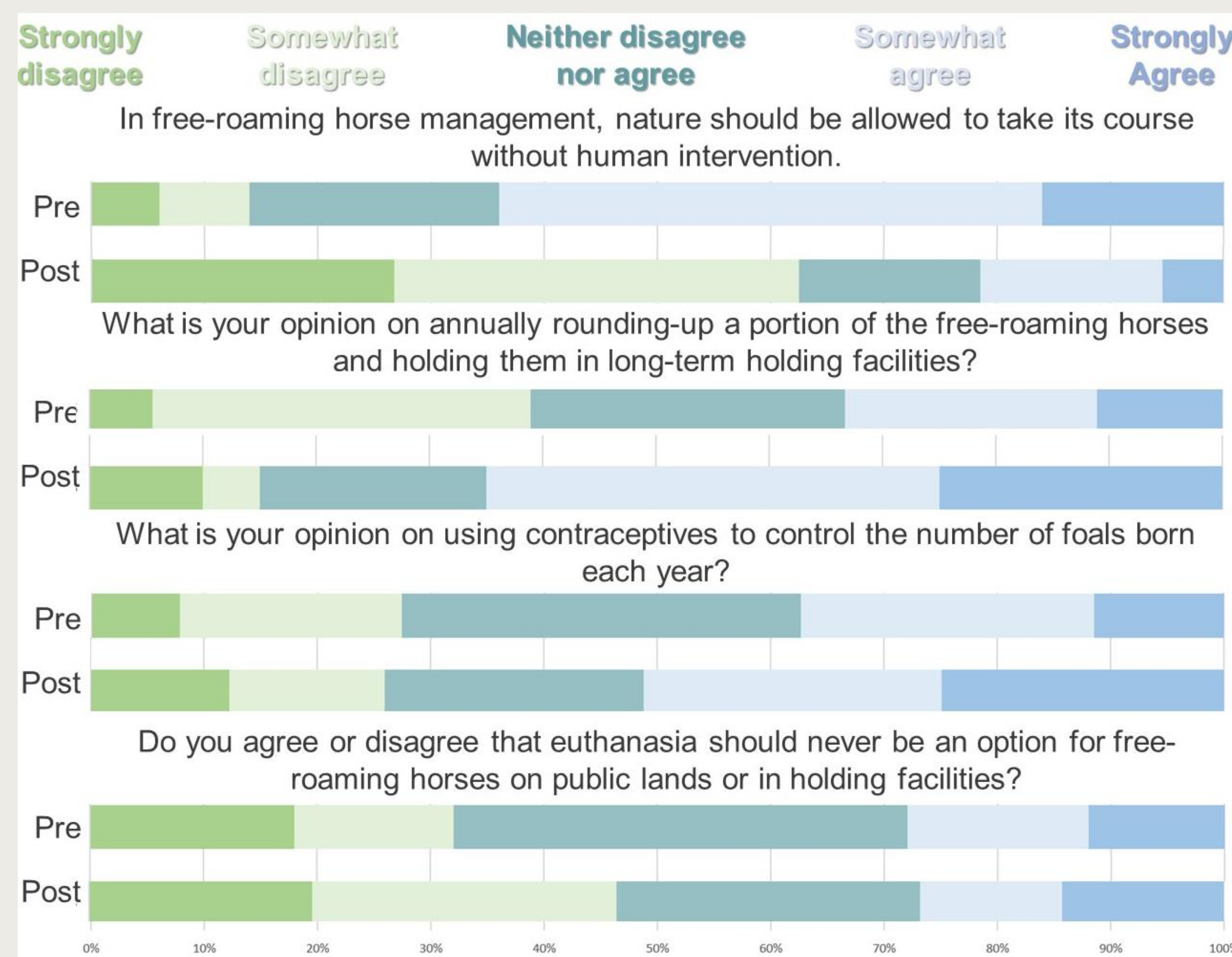


Figure 2 In assessments, there was an overall increase in acceptance of management particularly as it related to preventative methods.

Discussion



Figure 3 Participants interacting hands-on with a trained mustang in Delta, UT which was adopted from a federal holding facility.

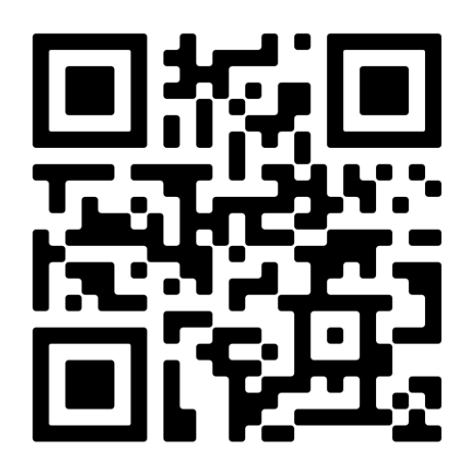
Rather than impressing beliefs regarding WHB, we aim to supply facts and multiple perspectives allowing participants to make informed personal opinions. We observed not only an increased empirical understanding of WHB biology, ecology, and rangeland science, but also changes in options with respect to management which are more congruent with agency goals and methods.



Figure 4 Attendees have experiences ranging from population modeling in the classroom, viewing wild horses and making forage estimates, and visiting a holding facility.

References

Frey, S. (2022). *U.S. Survey of the Public Knowledge and Opinions of Free-Roaming Horses and their Management*. <https://www.usuhumanwildlifeinteractions.com>



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