

## Medora businesses, statewide tourism could suffer without wild horses

*Though acute for some, overall impacts hard to quantify*

By Michael Standaert | North Dakota News Cooperative

These equine influencers go by names like Grizz, Arrowhead, Flax, Little Bear. They're neither pets, nor livestock, and they roam wild in North Dakota's only national park.

That may change pending an anticipated 2024 management decision by Theodore Roosevelt National Park staff to remove the nearly 200 horses, or cull to a greatly reduced number.

The decision is being closely watched by many who've followed and named the horses on social media posts over the years and by owners of businesses in and around Medora, the gateway town synonymous with the park.

"Everyone has their favorites," said Christine Kman, owner of a shop called Chasing Horses in Medora. She sells horse- and badlands-themed merchandise, and she and her husband Gary host tours so visitors can see horses, bison and other wildlife in the park.

Kman, like other merchants in Medora, is concerned about the economic impact of the National Park Service's plans.

While the business would survive the hit if horses were removed or their numbers reduced, they're "definitely a draw," she said. On top of the economic impact is one without a price tag. It saddens her and others that horses they've come to know and love may soon disappear.

"There were a lot of people who came last year because they were afraid maybe there wouldn't be any horses after this year," said Kman, who also co-founded Chasing Horses Wild Horse Advocates, a nonprofit fighting to keep the park's horses.

Mary Griffin, owner of Medora's Custer's Cottage, has a better idea of the impact on her business. She estimates she could lose at least one-fifth of her income if the horses are removed from the park.

"I have customers that come in the spring and the fall, solely because of the horses," Griffin said. "That's the only reason they are here. I'm a small lodging business, so I personally visit with people and know why they're here."

### Hard to quantify

Most businesses, whether in Medora, Dickinson, or Watford City, find it hard to tally income specifically related to the iconic horses. Statewide tourism impacts from the horses are equally tough to parse out. It's intangible, but it's also grounded in visitor experience.

"Business owners I've spoken to almost always talk about how the customers that come into their businesses talk about the joy of having horses in the park and how much they enjoy seeing them along with the rest of the wildlife," said Clarence Sitter, current president of the Medora Chamber of Commerce.

"I think as a community, we certainly would like to see the National Park Service do everything they can to keep them," he said.

Former mayor Doug Ellison, who operates the Amble Inn & Western Edge Books in town, said that over the years Medora has become synonymous with the national park and the park so synonymous with the horses that changing the status quo could be detrimental all around.

"If you take that away, it's really going to have a negative impact," he said. Ellison said he continues to hear from people who say they won't return to the park or visit nearly as often if the horses are removed. "If they're gone, a lot of people aren't going to return, which translates obviously into an economic impact, and that's a very important part of this," Ellison said.

Kaelee Wallace is marketing and communications director at the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation which facilitates the Medora Musical and other properties in the area. She said that although it is hard to gauge the economic value of the horses to the community, "their value to the visitor experience is definitely felt every day in our conversations with them."

What is known is that an average of 700,000 visitors come to the park each year.

Park service data from 2021 estimated that 796,000 visitors spent over \$56 million visiting the park, directly supporting at least 675 jobs through tourism in Medora and communities closest to the park. An additional \$62 million in economic activity is also generated in nearby communities directly from those visits, either through hotel, restaurant or other activity, the park service estimated.

State Department of Commerce director of tourism, Sara Otte Coleman, said the state has tried to calculate visitor spending directly related to the wild horses but hasn't come up with good numbers since so many factors are involved in a decision to visit the park.

"We do know that our visitors enjoy the uniqueness of the horses in our national park and it improves their experience," she said. "That said, it also is the sole motivator for some, we just can't measure that efficiently."

According to the park service, nearly 90 percent of park visitors surveyed from 2016 to 2018 supported maintaining wild horses at the South Unit. The North Unit is a separate section of the park and does not host horses.

An environmental assessment released by the park in September outlining options for maintaining, reducing or removing the horses, incorrectly stated that only 49 percent of those surveyed favored maintaining the herd but was citing the same survey.

That assessment stated that "the phased removal of horses from the South Unit would have little to no incremental impact on regional economic conditions given the other visitor opportunities available at the Park."

Superintendent of the park Angie Richman declined an interview for this story, but did comment that park staff are reviewing comments from the public received last November, and will be producing a comment analysis report after the review.

"We are also separately and concurrently assessing the applicability of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act," Richman said in an e-mailed response, adding that decisions will not be made until all those processes are complete.

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### 'RURAL' CON'T FROM PAGE 1

Winchester included that a spotlight was on rural America throughout the Covid pandemic, and many saw it as a way for their rural communities to be "saved."

"I was like, we already saved ourselves, we're full," he stated on the lunch hour webinar. "The pandemic, all it did was exacerbated the home values because the demand was already there."

Winchester noted that a positive effect from the pandemic was the prevalence of remote work, which opens a plethora of doors for folks to live rural who may not otherwise have the opportunity due to the location of their workplace.

Generational patterns of home ownership have also changed over the years, according to Winchester. Between 5%-25% of retirees move into smaller 'patio' homes upon retirement, leaving a larger home for another larger and younger working family to move into. However, these retirees, much less newcomers, are all having a difficult time finding a home that fits their needs in the area.

With a workforce shortage plaguing the state, newcomers are needed to fill the gaps. Winchester has done years of research in his position at the Extension studying the patterns of newcomers to rural regions and

identifying markers which indicate how likely they will be to stay and work in their new positions.

As it turns out, 'North Dakota nice' has a hefty sway over newcomers' decision to stay or move in five years' time. These numbers come from years of surveying newcomers who have been in the area for one - five years already.

"One of the questions that we asked them is 'do you believe that the community you moved to was welcoming' and a full 78% of newcomers said the community was [welcoming]," stated Winchester.

**"What we had found is for those that said the community was welcoming, 86% of the newcomer households said that they are going to be here in five years."**

On the flip side, 44%, nearly half of those who said the community was not welcoming, would be gone within five years of moving in.

"So if they've got local jobs, your

employers should be concerned about this because you cannot retain your labor and if you can't keep your labor," explained Winchester. "This becomes super important for us in better understanding how do you welcome people in, it's what we call resident recruitment."

Some may think small towns are just getting smaller, and that the ink has dried on the page telling their story. However, with the positive currents trending under the radar, small town North Dakota has the opportunity to pen its own beautiful story going forward.

**"Instead of living in the negative narrative, in the middle of nowhere, I actually say that we live in the middle of everywhere," said Winchester. "You put your house in the middle of all these opportunities around you."**

If you missed Tuesday's presentation, the entire webinar can be watched by following this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwVQK3krH4>.

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