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HEADLINE: Effort to save Shackleford Island's horses will only do more harm

BYLINE: ORRIN H. PILKEY Guest column

BODY:

Rep. Walter Jones' recently-enacted legislation to ``save" the Shackleford Banks wild horses, a measure also supported by Gov. Jim Hunt, actually strikes a blow against the public control and sound scientific management of environmental projects.

The measure, which President Clinton has signed into law, takes control of the wild horse herd away from the National Park Service and gives it to a small Harkers Island foundation formed just for that purpose. Among the former members of that foundation's board of directors is Walter Jones' wife, who resigned when the legislation was introduced.

In a self congratulatory press packet, Jones makes the spurious claim that the horses are descendants of those who jumped off Spanish galleons 300 years ago. Experts say that the herd actually has a Heinz 57 ancestry and that it originated only in the 20th century after the island was abandoned by most of its people inhabitants.

Like wild horses everywhere, these have taken every opportunity to expand their numbers beyond the carrying capacity of their environment. During hundreds of visits to Shackleford -- a short boat ride from Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment Marine Laboratory -- I have observed vast overgrazing of its maritime forests, washover fans in its salt marshes.

Many of those marshes, in particular, now resemble suburban lawns. That's not good for the future of local fisheries, because intact salt marshes serve as nurseries for young fish and the organisms that they eat.

Barrier Islands like Shackleford, which is part of the Cape Lookout National Seashore, depend on such vegetation for their very evolution. For this reason, the National Park Service began a controversial study of ways to reduce the herd size from numbers that have reached well over 200.

The investigation was complex, requiring an understanding of the island's vegetation as well as strategies to maintain a healthy gene pool while reducing breeding within families. Further fanning the controversy in the midst of the study; a large number of horses were found to be diseased and North Carolina's state veterinarian ordered them to be put down.

Horse lovers opposed every National Park Service move, but National Seashore Superintendent Bill Harris held his ground with the Interior Department's apparent backing. However, Harris was then removed on short notice, directly as a result of pressure from Jones. In the end, the Park Service didn't have the backbone to support its own superintendent when the heat was turned up.

Jones' bill will keep the Shackleford herd at 100 to 110 animals, not much different than the 65-100 animal limits proposed by the park service. The difference is that the park service would have employed sound scientific genetic and vegetation studies to manage the herd, while at the same time giving the public a say in its decision-making. Under Jones' bill, all kinds of decisions will be made by the Harkers Island foundation's six member board.

That sets an unfortunate precedent of outside control of a national seashore by a small special interest group -- with the apparent, inexplicable support of the Clinton administration and North Carolina's own governor.

Orrin H. Pilkey, is James B. Duke Professor at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment Division of Earth and Ocean Sciences and director of Duke's Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines.

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