PROPOSED MANAGEMENT AND ASSESSMENT

OF THE

FERAL DONKEY (*EQUUS ASINUS*)

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San Miguel Island, California, is a 14,000 acre island administered by the United States Navy, and, since October 20, 1976, managed on a day-to-day basis by the National Park Service at Channel Islands National Monument. The island is the furthest west of the Channel Islands. It rises to an elevation of 831 feet, and is of fairly gradual relief.

Chumash Indians lived on the island until sometime in the 1800's, but the only recent inhabitants have been individuals and families who tried to farm (rarely) and graze sheep. Since 1942 the only "long-term" inhabitants have been scientists from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Vegetation on San Miguel Island was probably originally coastal scrub, including possibly some small trees or at least some large individuals of bushy species such as Artemisia or Lupinus. The several years the sheep were on the island, however, resulted in widespread vegetative damage, which in turn has led to considerable wind and water erosion (manifested by unstable sand dunes in many areas throughout the island and large erosion gullies on many of the hillsides).

Consequently, sheep were totally eradicated from the island by 1969 in a joint effort by the United States Navy and the National Park Service, and for the most part vegetation has made a remarkable comeback and many of the dunes are once again stable. At that time there were a few feral burros on San Miguel, but these were not eradicated.

Now, however, estimates in the number of donkeys average around 30 or 40 animals, and signs of their influence on the island vegetation and on the rate of erosional recovery are becoming much more easily noticed. Now that we have taken over management of San Miguel Island from the Navy and since we will be managing it as a natural area in the National Park System, our basic goal should be to remove any exotics from and reintroduce any extirpated natives to the island ecosystems. For these reasons, we are forced to take a more critical look at the role of the feral donkey on San Miguel Island.

Several alternatives are possible. We can continue to do nothing. But aside from this being against management policy for National Park Service natural areas (with such attendant concerns as not providing the island visitor a real natural experience, and placing into question our ability to be able to manage a natural area properly), evidence indicates that the feral donkey population probably has an adverse effect on the island vegetation, and could be slowing down, or even setting back, the island's process of restoration from the effects of erosion.

We could reduce the number of animals to the point that the remaining animals would have only a negligible effect on the island. But this would be a project requiring monitoring and almost yearly control. Since no historic or biological reason exists for even a remnant population of the feral animals on the island, this alternative would seem overly costly.

The most logical alternative seems to be to totally remove the animals from San Miguel Island. Three sub-alternatives occur in this case. The burros could either be captured (by means of tranquilizers or by means of physical round-up) and taken off the island, they could perhaps be sterilized so their numbers would drop through the years until there were finally no more, or they could be directly eradicated now.

Of these three sub-alternatives, capture of the donkeys would be prohibitively expensive unless there were mitigating circumstances such as a great demand from the public to acquire the animals. But inasmuch as other parks with feral burro problems have had difficulty in placing their animals with qualified individuals, this does not seem to be the case.

The sub-alternative of sterilization would also be costly, but would also leave unchecked for several years the noticeable influence of the present donkeys on the island ecology.

The most logical sub-alternative seems to be direct eradication now, and this is what we propose. We propose to send a team of rangers with rifles to the island in the near future, in the company of a National Park Service biologist completent in hoofed mammal management; an attempt will be made to destroy all the animals on the island over the course of a few days.

Impact of direct eradication would include the onset, or, in some cases, the continuation, at an accelerated rate, of environmental restoration. However, short-term results would also include the presence of approximately 30 large animals carcasses scattered about the island. These will probably be left to decompose naturally. This could provide a couple of months worth of food for various scavenging native animals, such as the island fox and various species of gulls and hawks. However, the dead animals might also be offensive to the sensibilities of visitors to San Miguel. Presently, this would be very little problem inasmuch as visitors are not now allowed access to the island.

No mitigating measures can be thought of for the proposed action, and the other alternatives have been examined above.

No Environmental Impact Statement will be written for the proposal, since Federal action will be minimal.

It has been decided that no further administrative action will be necessary.

Signed: _____
Superintendent

Date: _____