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David Todd [00:00:03] Good afternoon, my name is David Todd. I'm here with Ben Masters. And, with his permission, our idea is to record this interview for a research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for storage and permanent access at an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:00:36] And Mr. Masters would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit as well.

David Todd [00:00:42] And I wanted to make sure that's OK with him.

Ben Masters [00:00:45] Got the green light! Let's go.

David Todd [00:00:47] OK. It is Friday, October 22nd, 2021. It's about 1:10 Central Time. As I said, my name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. I am in Austin. We are conducting a remote interview over a Ringr app with Ben Masters, who I believe is based in Austin as well. He is a graduate of Texas A&M and has worked as, variously, an adventurer, an author, a filmmaker, and much of this has been organized through his firm Fin and Fur Films. His documentaries include "The River in the Wall" and most recently, a pending release called "Deep in the Heart".

David Todd [00:01:35] About five years ago, he released a film and an accompanying book, both called "Unbranded", and these two productions told the story of a trip he took aboard mustangs, going from the Mexico / U.S. border to the Canadian boundary, and his life and work with these mustangs, as depicted in the film and in the book, and then since then, I think give him a special perspective on the animals and the policy issues that they bring up.

David Todd [00:02:06] So today we will talk a little bit about his life and career, and, and focus on his work with these mustangs.

David Todd [00:02:15] So with that little introduction, I wanted to thank Mr. Masters for his time today.

Ben Masters [00:02:22] Well, thanks for having me. This is a real honor to get to be a part of this.

David Todd [00:02:27] Well, thank you. It's, it's a privilege to have you on. So thank you.

David Todd [00:02:32] We usually start these interviews with a question about your upbringing, and I was hoping that you could tell us a little bit about your childhood, and if there were any people or experiences, you know, friends, family, whoever was in your sphere, who might have been a big influence in your interest in working with animals.

Ben Masters [00:02:53] Oh, interesting. So I grew up in Amarillo, Texas. And, you know, I've got a great dad who spent a lot of time taking me, and investing a lot of time teaching me about, you know, cattle and horses, to some extent. And then I've got a great grandfather as well, Poppa Tate, who would take me for weeks at a time as a kid and show me around his, you know, thousand acres that he farmed outside of McLean, Texas. So, yeah, looking back, I was really fortunate to have a lot of really good role models that taught me about, you know, working with the land and working with animals.

Ben Masters [00:03:33] And I got my first job horseback think when I was about 15 or so, riding pens for a feed yard outside of Dimmit. Yeah, I guess I started, got my first, my first mustang whenever I was 18 or 19. And I've had one since, I guess. I'm thirty three right now, so about half my life I've been around those mustangs. They are good horses.

David Todd [00:04:07] Well, so this gives us a little idea of where are you from and maybe some of those kind of informal, you know, experiences and touch points that you've had. You also have a formal training in wildlife biology from Texas A&M University in College Station. Could you maybe tell us about any lessons that you learned from your classmates or professors at A&M that might have helped you in the career that you've found yourself in?

Ben Masters [00:04:39] Well, I don't know how much I learned in class, but I learned a whole lot on North Gate. That was supposed to be a joke, David. I mean, A&M, it was, it was neat because, you know, I've always kind of grown up hunting and fishing and working on different ranches, but I'd never had the opportunity to become kind of formally trained in some of the basics of, of wildlife biology or what? What is a species? What is a ecoregion? What makes different vegetation communities thrive on different types of soil? And A&M really opened my eyes to appreciating what we have in Texas and in my home, but also just gave me a larger perspective of what wildlife conservation is, and the history that we have in Texas around it, as well as the United States. So I loved it.

Ben Masters [00:05:57] I mean, I I started off in the business school and I remember asking my counselor if she could switch me over to the wildlife school, and she kind of looked at me like I had lost my mind. But looking back, that was one of the best decisions I've made in my life, because I learned a, learned just a bunch of really cool stuff, and learned some stuff that was really useful as well.

Ben Masters [00:06:28] Took me a little while to get through school. I didn't go to school in the summers or in the falls. I would do this annual rotation where I guided pack trips in Montana, in the Yellowstone region in the summer. And then I would guide elk hunts in Wyoming, September, October, and then November, December, first half of January, I'd work on an outfit outside of Laredo. And then attend 20 hours or the classes or so in the springtime. So I was able to work my way through college while also gaining a lot of outside of the classroom experience as well. Yeah, it was great. Great years right there.

David Todd [00:07:13] Well, that's fascinating. That it's not your typical college tenure. And could you maybe give us a little bit more detail about these pack trips that that you were guiding? That's, that's fascinating.

Ben Masters [00:07:29] Sure. So, yeah, I worked on ranches in Colorado and in Montana in different outfits every summer through college, primarily in Montana, both on the south side of Yellowstone, on the Cody side, and on north side on the Gardiner, Montana side. And some of the ranches, we would just do a little small day trips, packing dudes around the hills. And then other trips we would do six, eight day horseback trips into Yellowstone National Park and surrounding national forests.

David Todd [00:08:09] And I think you also mentioned that you, you helped support elk hunting trips, is that right?

Ben Masters [00:08:18] Yeah, I did I did a lot of the, the horse wrangling, the packing the folks in, and packing the elk out, setting up camp, setting them, setting them down. We would do that just south of Yellowstone, about a month and a half a year. And that was burly. It was cold. Didn't know a lot of the horses. A lot of horses were pretty different levels of experience. And yeah, that was, that was a test right there.

David Todd [00:08:48] You're saying that you were unfamiliar with the horses or the riders?

Ben Masters [00:08:54] Both, well I mean, we would get new guests coming in every week, and we had, oh, I don't know, probably about 80 head of horses and mules that we would be, you know, packing in and out. And they were working animals. They weren't my own personal stock. So sometimes you'd have, you know, really gentle mules and then other times you would have animals that, you know, didn't know how to pick up their feet or, you know, you'd have a pack slip on them and they'd blow up and, you know, send your string running down a mountain. So there was, there are some, some pretty hairy stuff that happened there. But, you know, looking back, it was a really good experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

David Todd [00:09:44] And then the last sort of side gig you had was down in Laredo. Of what was going on in that area?

Ben Masters [00:09:55] Sure. So there was a family out of Dallas that had a ranch right outside of Laredo. East of Laredo, there's a big, big bluff called the Bordas Escarpment. It's kind of that separation between, you know, the stuff, the, the watershed that flows to the Rio and the watershed that flows due East towards the Gulf of Mexico. And it started at that red sand transition into the more of the gravelly, caliche type of hills on the Laredo side. Beautiful bluff. The whole thing's covered up in electric, wind turbines now, but it was, it wasn't at the time that I was there. It was just gorgeous: only real topography that you find in South Texas. And it was a ranch that was owned by a family in Dallas that, you know, loved to hunt deer and manage habitat, grow quail. So I would go down there in December and January and ran a big set of trail cameras on the property, and he would send me down some of his clients and I'd take them out to go chase a quail or chase a deer. And I did that for four or five years in the, in the fall, as I was going through, through college.

David Todd [00:11:22] Well, you know, it's funny, it's, it's all over the country, you know, from Montana to Colorado to South Texas, and lots of different tasks, but it seems like the perfect preparation for things that you did later on. And a lot of this is, you know, in the field. Were there any books or movies or sort of cultural artifacts that might have been influential for you?

Ben Masters [00:11:59] Yeah, I think, I think for me, growing up, I was always enthralled by the natural history that you'd see on TV, whether that's PBS Nature or some of the BBC stuff, the David Attenborough, getting to be transported to a different part of the world and get to see some of the wildlife that got to live there, some of those cool landscapes. You know, that stuff has always interested me.

Ben Masters [00:12:38] And really inspired me to get into photography, I guess about 15, 16 years ago, and then I was a fairly decent stills photographer for a few years before getting into video. And now pretty much all I do is, is moving, moving picture. And, yeah, I would say those were the, the things as a kid...

Ben Masters [00:13:08] I look back on it, I feel like they did a little bit of a disservice, because I'm in that business now of natural history and wildlife filmmaking. And a lot of the times you see stuff on TV, it's like this idea of this wildlife that exists separate from humanity. And in reality, there is no separation like that that exists anywhere on Earth. It just does not exist. And it kind of created this separation in my head as a kid of like, "Oh, I must live in a domesticated place because I don't have these, you know, things, or these views where there's no humans or there's wildlife and there's no humans." When in reality, that's not the case. You know, we have some of the most incredible wildlife spectacles and events and species found right here in Texas, in our home, as anywhere else on Earth, especially in the United States. And I wish I had appreciated that as a kid.

Ben Masters [00:14:26] And you know, it's taken me, I guess I'm thirty three now, to fully recognize Texas for how badass of a place it really is. And getting to film here for quite a few years and getting to see some of these visuals and then comparing the visuals that I've gotten with some of the best of visuals that you see on BBC or Netflix. I mean, we have just this amazing stuff here as anywhere else in the world.

David Todd [00:14:59] You know, Ben, you bring up this, this really interesting kind of aspect of, of natural history and wildlife films and that, if I'm following you right, it's this idea that, you know, there's nothing outside the lens, outside of the field of view. And, and I think, if I'm following you, you're saying, well, you know, anywhere you go, there's something happening to the side of the camera, and behind the camera, and that there are people there. Is that where you're going with this, that there's a context for these wildlife and that it is usually kind of a human world?

Ben Masters [00:15:38] Yes. But I think what I'm also trying to say is that. Whenever you show a whole bunch of wildebeest in Africa, it's not like those wildebeests just magically were there for all of time, and they're there despite everything humanity has thrown at them. You know, they're there, and those migrations are there, because people have created parks, and people have done philanthropy, and governments have acted, and the citizens have spoken. Like none of that stuff happens in a vacuum. You know, the wildlife that we have today is a choice that we make, and a lot of times you don't see that in natural history. And I think that that's a shame.

David Todd [00:16:32] I see, OK, that helps a lot. Thanks for, thanks for explaining that, so. So this next thing, and you may have sort of covered this in passing, but maybe you can kind of drill down on it. So you've spent a good while now working as a filmmaker and writer, and really like a participant, in wildlife and conservation. What do you think drew you to doing this? It's an unusual career.

Ben Masters [00:17:08] I think what drew me to it is, isn't particularly the art of it, although I've grown to appreciate the art of it. I think it's the impact that it can have. You know, the way I explain film, is it's somewhat similar as going into church, because in a theater, it's the only place where you have to turn off your cell phone, you're not supposed to talk to your neighbor, and you're supposed to pay full attention to what's in front of you. But it's a lot more impactful because you're not just having somebody talk, you can have music, you can have text, you can have maps, you can have emotions, you can take people on a journey. You can show them things that they can never see with their own eyes. And you get to use the tools of all the arts in one to, to tell a story. And, you know, you have some incredibly tough human beings that I have never seen, you know, shed a tear before, break down in a movie because you can just time stuff right to just punch them right in the "feels".

Ben Masters [00:18:39] So it's, it's not for me, like, I didn't get in to making films because I love to make films. I got into making films because I wanted to get a bunch of horses adopted. And now I'm making films because I want to get mountain lions regulated. I want to get ocelots out there on the landscape. I want to get minimum environmental flows in our rivers. And it's just the most effective vehicle that I know of to get that stuff done.

David Todd [00:19:10] That is a very succinct way to put it.

David Todd [00:19:16] But as you said, the filmmaking is uses every tool in the creative toolbox - all the gear. How did you learn the skills to tell these conservation stories in, in video?

Ben Masters [00:19:39] So making movies is a team sport. One of my biggest pet peeves is whenever you see in the credits a film "by somebody", because there is no such thing as a film by like an individual person. Somebody is funding it. Somebody is editing it. Somebody is writing the music. Somebody is getting the visual assets. Somebody is producing it. Somebody, like, there's so many components that go into a movie and that's what I love about it, is, it's a team sport, and for whatever reason in my life, I have been able to have attracted some of the most, some of the best talent really that exists in the United States to work with me. And that's the primary reason why our films are good is, you know, I'll have an idea and then be able to surround myself with people that are extremely talented at a particular task and just give them the freedom to run with it and make something much better than I could have ever done alone.

David Todd [00:21:00] Well, that's, that is a very modest way to put it.

David Todd [00:21:06] So a lot of these films are, as I understand it, under the umbrella of Fin and Fur films. How did that organization get started?

Ben Masters [00:21:19] Well, I just needed a company to handle all the finances and stuff, so I wasn't personally liable for everything. It's grown to what it is now, where we're doing a feature film about every two years, and we're doing, probably about five or six short films a year, and I've developed a good archive of material. And, recently started doing quite a bit of contract work. We just did a big, big contract for Disney Plus. We shot some sequences for BBC's Green Planet. Yeah, it's grown a lot, lot bigger than I had anticipated it would whenever I started it, I guess, gosh, that's probably a good 10 years ago or so.

David Todd [00:22:09] Well, so I think one of the signature things that you all have done is, is this "Unbranded" project, which is sort of the triple threat. I mean, there's of course, the, the,

maybe quadruple threat. I mean, there was getting and training these horses, actually executing the ride, and then making the movie, making the book. Can, can you talk a little about that project and, and then maybe we can roll into talking about mustangs in general?

Ben Masters [00:22:42] Sure. So 2010 I'd just got done with, I guess it was my sophomore year and I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life, so for the, for the summer, I got a buddy and talked two friends into dropping out of the fall classes, and we went and adopt some horses, and we did the Continental Divide Trail with them that summer, which took us into the fall, into October a little bit. And that was before "Unbranded". So I've done, I've ridden from Mexico to Canada twice.

Ben Masters [00:23:30] But that first trip, in 2010, we did it. And at that, at that time, you know, money was pretty tight and we didn't have, we honestly didn't have the cash to be able to go out and buy the horses that we wanted to. But there was this federal incentive program where if you went and adopted a mustang, they would give you $700. So we picked up a trailer full of wild horses and got paid 700 dollars a head for them, which I thought at the time was just like the sweetest deal ever. Trained them. And then we, we did the Continental Divide Trail that summer, which goes through New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana.

Ben Masters [00:24:20] And what I learned during that trip was that the horses at first can be, you know, a handful. But if you give them enough time and if you get your, you know, your saddle beds wet enough, they, they will turn into really, really good horses, especially for general purpose trail horses, which is what most people want good horses to be. And we did that trip. I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about the world.

Ben Masters [00:24:51] Became a big advocate of public lands. You know, how cool is it that we live in a country where there is a public lands corridor that goes all the way from the southern border, three thousand miles through the most badass mountain range, all the way up to the Canadian border, and there's 40 to 50-mile stretches of trail where you don't even see a single power line pole? And it's designated wilderness. And the way that I saw it, is going to be how people see it, you know, one hundred years from now, I hope. And the way we saw it was how people saw it one hundred years ago, you know, minus the forest fires and climate change and that kind of stuff. But like it, it is remarkably untouched. I think that that's so neat that, that people decided to set that much aside and I wish they had done more.

Ben Masters [00:25:49] Yeah, but we get done with that trip and I looked at it. And, you know, came home and told friends about it and had some, some still photographs and wrote an article in Western Horseman magazine. And people were, I guess, inspired by the story and I had a lot of folks say you should do it again and make a film out of it. And I needed an excuse to do it again, because it was some of the best months of my life. So a couple of years later, put together a new group of friends and decided to do it again, and this time we documented it and made a film which became "Unbranded".

Ben Masters [00:26:38] Was able to put together enough money to get the documentary created. The primary, primarily those funds came through a website called Kickstarter, which is a website where you share this idea, this vision that you have for a film, and people donate to help your dream come true. And, yeah, we that's how we funded the movie, or how we got the initial funding, was through just sharing the dream that we had. And people pitched in and made it happen. This is a pretty remarkable story to be able to launch your career like that, and I think it just shows that there's a lot of good folks out there that want to help you out. So that's what I did.

Ben Masters [00:27:32] What's that?

David Todd [00:27:33] I'm sorry. Go ahead. Sorry to interrupt.

Ben Masters [00:27:36] I was just going to finish that out. Any chance I get to help out a young filmmaker I always take it, because, you know, that, quite literally, my career was launched on the benevolence of others.

David Todd [00:27:49] Yeah, yeah. It's interesting when, when strangers help you out. So I'm curious, what do you think resonated with your supporters?

Ben Masters [00:28:04] I think, I think "Unbranded" had a few, had a few things that that really resonated with people. At the time, whenever I launched that whole idea, I was just in my early 20s and had just gotten done with college. And it wasn't until, until now, or the past couple of years, that I've started a family, and sunk some roots into my company, that I can kind of look back on that period of time and realize how, how wonderful of an opportunity it was to have the privilege to get to do something like that, but also this acknowledgment that whenever you're in your early twenties, I think you feel it, you know, that period of time's going to last forever. But life does happen. You know, you do have careers, you do have debt, you have mortgages, you have families. It gets harder and harder. Or at least my life has, to be able to take six months off and to just go chase this once-in-a-lifetime dream.

Ben Masters [00:29:10] And I think everybody, at some point in their time, at some point in time in their life, wishes that they had done that, or wants to still do that in their life. But it's rare to find people that actually do. And I find that really fascinating because, you know, I've done quite a few big trails. I've, you know, taken months off of my life to go and do something like that. And I'll never regret it. And it's not that expensive. You just kind going to have to plan for it. But if you go and you ask anybody that hikes the Arizona Trail or the Continental Divide Trail or the Appalachian Trail, or even just goes and serves for six months in a charity somewhere, it is very, very, I don't think I've ever met somebody who regretted doing it, but I know a lot of people who have regretted not doing it. And I think "Unbranded" tapped into that kind of spirit and desire to chase a dream that our societal norm is telling you is a bad idea. But to do it anyways, I think it tapped into that, that spirit of adventure that people wanted it, people craved it in their own lives.

David Todd [00:30:49] That's really well said. Yeah, I imagine a lot of people see these, these ventures as, as just wonderful sort of life-affirming escapes to do something that's really unstructured and outside of, as you said, the societal norms and bounds.

Ben Masters [00:31:12] I mean, what's, what's your goal, David? I mean, did you ever do something like that? And if not, why?

David Todd [00:31:20] Well, we could talk about that. I don't want to do that on your time, though.

David Todd [00:31:29] So let's, let's talk a little bit about mustangs. I mean, you've had a number of, of sort of time-outs with different kinds of projects. As you said before, you know you've made movies about mountain lions, and about ensuring that there are minimum flows, and, you know, ocelots, and it, it's, it goes on and on. But, but what was it that appealed to you about, you know, exploring the story of mustangs.

Ben Masters [00:32:01] I think, I think my fascination with mustangs really came from that first time we did the Continental Divide Trail, where we adopted some mustangs that, you know, the Bureau of Land Management was paying people to get rid of it. And they were great horses. I mean, there was nothing wrong with these horses at all, and there was a lot right with the horses. They were incredibly tough. They had really solid feet. They had mindsets that were built for trail riding. They had a lot of common sense. But at the same time, they had never been handled by people. And so a lot of times they were three, four or five years old, so they were scared.

Ben Masters [00:32:47] And that difference in their upbringing is what separates them from a domestic horse, but their horses. I mean, their psychology is the same. They just have a different upbringing. And you have to recognize that whenever you start training them. And you're also, one of the nice things about working with mustangs, working with wild horses, they hadn't been touched by anybody, so they haven't developed the bad habits that you see with a lot of domestic horses. So they're a clean slate that you get to work with.

Ben Masters [00:33:31] I found that fascinating, and I also just found it saddening, whenever I first got involved with the mustang issue, that there was 15,000 horses that were locked up in these holding facilities because they have to do population control, you know, on the public lands. And I think it was in '07 - it's whenever they put a stop to all of the slaughterhouses in the United States. So now, after '07, in order to slaughter a horse for for human consumption, you have to travel to Canada or to Mexico, to those slaughterhouses.

Ben Masters [00:34:16] And the intention of it was to stop poor breeding of domesticated horses and, you know, kill that industry. But what it ended up happening is now they just have to do these really long, these really long trailer rides. So that's one of the unfortunate things that, that happened out of it. But it also helped, you know, foster better, better domestication and stop the horse meat industry. You know, personally, I'm not into eating horses.

Ben Masters [00:34:52] But, what that meant is prior to '07 with the BLM, there was a place for these excess horses to go, in the sense that they were getting slaughtered. But whenever that stopped, there wasn't a place for those horses to go and they either had to be adopted, or, if they weren't adopted, then they were put into these holding pens, which were pretty much feed yards where they lived for the rest of their lives. And then as they got older, sometimes they would go into these long-term leased pastures.

Ben Masters [00:35:35] So I just was fascinated. I'd never heard about any of that before, that there were thousands of horses pretty much just sitting in confinement by the federal government waiting for somebody to adopt them.

Ben Masters [00:35:49] And my experience with those horses was very positive. I thought that they were really amazing animals, and that was the instigation for "Unbranded", was, you know, how can I make some media, or how can I make a difference, in wild horse management?

Ben Masters [00:36:08] And the concept that we had was to replicate that Continental Divide trip using just wild horses that we adopted from the BLM and try to get a bunch of them adopted and fix the whole damn problem. I was successful in getting a lot of horses adopted through "Unbranded" and through the film. There's, I don't know how many hundreds of horses, that, that we ended up getting homes for.

Ben Masters [00:36:36] But as far as fixing the problems, I regret to say that we failed in that regard. The wild horse / burro issue's gotten more and more unsustainable, more and more costly over time, and the ecological impacts are worse and worse as the years progress. It's a very unfortunate, very predictable thing that has happened and it is a shame that such a wonderful animal could become, instead of a celebration of good management and beautiful beauty on our public lands, a symbol of controversy and resentment in a lot of circles out West.

David Todd [00:37:23] Yeah. Well, thanks for explaining that. Can we sort of spool back and talk a little bit about the, the origins of the horse in the new world? I mean, I understand they were here in prehistoric times, but maybe you can give us a quick trip through history. I believe that, was it Cortez, who introduced horses to the New World?

Ben Masters [00:37:55] That's correct. Yeah. So, you know the, the ancestors to the modern-day horse, they did originate in North America, and then they crossed over the Bering Land Strait, where they differentiated into species, the asses, the zebras and then the predecessors to the modern-day horse, Equus caballus. And then the Spanish were the first Europeans to bring them into the New World. I don't remember if Cortez was the first person to bring them. I know he had horses whenever, you know, they went into Central America, but I think that there may have been somebody else that had brought horses, either into Cuba or into the Virgin Islands, previous to that.

Ben Masters [00:38:45] But as the Spanish were exploring the New World, they had horses, they had sheep, they had goats, they had pigs. And as they were, you know, colonizing different islands, a lot of times, they would, you know, drop animals off and hope that they would become a food source to be picked up later.

Ben Masters [00:39:08] In the case of horses and cows, you know, some of them inevitably escaped or were set loose to breed, and that's what happened in the United States. I believe the, what many historians trace the roots of the first large amount of horses getting free was in the Pueblo Revolt in the late 1700s, and that was a revolt against - the indigenous peoples that were living in New Mexico against the Spanish. And the Spanish had to flee. A whole bunch of horses got loose.

Ben Masters [00:39:56] And I find that fascinating because less than a hundred years later, whenever Lewis and Clark expedition went west and explored the Louisiana Purchase, they found horses that were not only a part of many different Native cultures, but were an integral part into their culture, and that they had mastered horsemanship in under, in under 100 years, which I find fascinating, even developing their own riding styles, developing their saddles, developing their attack, developing their own animal husbandry. Really, really amazing feat.

Ben Masters [00:40:43] And, so, you know, 1800s, late 1700s, horse numbers exploded across the Great Plains and the American West, along with, you know, the Longhorn, feral cattle, feral hogs. And then, as Europeans and Americans continued to settle further and further West, they, you know, set up barbed wire. They, you know, wanted to control the number of animals on their land that were consuming grass. So a lot of the wild horses were either domesticated and turned into ranch horses, or some of them were shot.

Ben Masters [00:41:31] But it was in World War I and World War II, those were two of the big times where the wild horses really got diminished in number, because they were gathered and used for, for meat to send to soldiers. And then also they were gathered and especially in World War I, they were caught, trained for battle, and shipped to Europe as, as fighting animals.

Ben Masters [00:41:57] So, you know, as the West and the Great Plains, we don't we don't have, we didn't really have wild horse populations that didn't get consumed. It was only out West in the Great Basin, primarily and in a bunch of the more rugged desert landscapes, primarily, there's a few exceptions, where these wild horse herds existed.

Ben Masters [00:42:27] In 1971, there was a lady by the name of Velma Johnson, also known as Wild Horse Annie, who succeeded in her life goal of finding protection of these wild horses, so that they didn't go, so that they weren't eliminated. And that culminated in the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971. And I find it interesting that it was it was passed by all. It was unanimously passed. There was no partisanship in it. Like the whole country was united around saying, like, hey, these things, these are a symbol of the American West. They're integral to our spirit. We need to keep these things around, which I find to be really, really cool.

Ben Masters [00:43:19] So the horse got protection and then underneath that protection from being gathered, it was, they were protected in what they call, "herd management areas". So they essentially figured out ... And this is the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Land Management is the entity that is in charge of managing wild horses and burros. It's a federal entity. The Bureau of Land Management did surveys. They figured out where those horses were at. They called them, "herd management areas". They drew boundaries around them and said, "You know, this is where the wild horses are at and they're protected.".

Ben Masters [00:44:05] Looking back on that Act, I don't think that they had really thought it through that well, because there wasn't a good provision of what's going to happen whenever there's two times that many horses, or three times that many horses, or five times that many horses, or, or 15 times the amount of horses in those different herd management areas.

Ben Masters [00:44:29] And it became controversial because you had different stakeholders that were also using that land. You had sheep and goats, you had cattle, you had livestock, you had endangered species. You had, you know, fish that require healthy watersheds in desert ecosystems. You have all these other groups, and all these other animals, that are impacted by these horses. And to be honest, they've, these horses, the only spots where they were, weren't captured previous to getting a protected area was in a lot of our most desolate, desert, harsh terrain that exists in North America. And a lot of that stuff is is fairly sensitive habitat that isn't really a preferred landscape for a large grazing animal. But that's just kind of the only spot that they had left before they were protected.

Ben Masters [00:45:34] So what ended up happening is the wild horse population grew underneath the protection, and then I believe it was in 1987, the Federal Land Management Policy Act, also known as "FLIP MA", kind of updated the Taylor Grazing Act of 1937, which is how a lot of the grazing of public lands, grazing allotments for cattle are negotiated out West, as well as the wild horses, as well as the wild horse issue, or the wild horse population size.

Ben Masters [00:46:07] So that Act said, "OK, in each of these herd management areas, we're going to establish a appropriate management level, an "AML". It's going to have a high end,

and it's going to have a low end. So Herd Management Area X is 100,000 acres, and the appropriate management level for, for that 100,000 acres is going to be 250 to 400 horses. And then whenever it reaches that high end appropriate management level, then we're going to gather down to the low end. And then that way, they're always going to stay in that sweet spot and they're not going to have negative impacts to the land. And there's also forage available for other users, primarily, you know, large ungulates like deer, elk and then the agricultural - the, the cattle, sheep, and goats.

Ben Masters [00:47:02] So that's what happened for many, many decades. And it wasn't until the United States, that, that 2007, whenever the horse slaughter became illegal, what it did is it just created this huge saturation of the horse market, where prior to that there was a place to, you know, go to slaughter horses. So you didn't have like these old horses, you didn't have horses that weren't being used. Like it was more acceptable for them to be turned into human food or for dog food. And then whenever that ended, the breeding didn't stop immediately and there was just this huge saturation in the horse market.

Ben Masters [00:47:58] And whenever that happened, it also impacted the wild horse adoption demand. And that's whenever they couldn't, they couldn't get enough horses adopted, they couldn't get enough horses, they didn't have a place to put them. So that's whenever they started putting them into these long-term holding facilities inside of these short-term holding facilities.

Ben Masters [00:48:21] And it's gotten so unsustainable, and it's gotten so kicked down the can by different administrations, to where, where we're at right now because we have about 50,000 horses that are essentially locked up in pens. And then on these long-term grazing pastures, living a lifestyle that isn't wild. That is no shape or form being a wild horse. It's costing the federal government $80 million a year to house them there. And because people are pissed off and frustrated with the whole situation, they're not putting any more money into trying to find a sustainable solution.

Ben Masters [00:49:03] So out on the rangeland, where we're at right now is the appropriate management level of all the herds combined is around 30,000 animals. But there's nearly a hundred thousand animals. So there's three times as many horses, and they're having extreme impacts on the land, especially in the Great Basin, which is a lot of fairly delicate ecosystems in the sagebrush steppe, particularly on the riparian habitat. And that riparian habitat is needed for sage grouse, for a lot of different reptiles, for a lot of different ungulates, many different endangered species. It's just this really sad situation that has happened as different administrations have failed to find a sustainable solution that respects the land and the horses, and it's just really unfortunate.

David Todd [00:50:09] It seems like this whole situation with the mustangs has, has deteriorated. And I'm curious if you can take us back to, you know, the origins of, of, I guess, the efforts to try to protect the mustang back in 1971, the Wild and Free Roaming Horses and Burro Act. And I think you said that there was really bipartisan and very strong support across the board. What - you mentioned that, that part of it was about heritage, I think. What, you know, were the ideas behind doing this? You know, did it also has to do with humane treatment of animals, or ecological reasons, or how would you summarize that?

Ben Masters [00:51:03] I think that the wild horse has been a kind of symbol of the American West for as long as the United States has existed, which, personally, I find really strange

because ecologically it's an invasive species. I mean, why not have hundreds of thousands of buffalo on our public lands instead of wild horses?

Ben Masters [00:51:34] But I, I'm with the Act. Like I think it was a good thing to have. And I think that they are a symbol. I mean, it's not me thinking: like, they are a symbol of the American West. And I think that it was a really good thing to say, like, "Hey, let's, let's protect some of these herds." It's just a shame that they that they didn't manage them.

Ben Masters [00:52:00] But I think, I mean, you have to, you have to take historical context, as well. I mean, in a lot of the 1900s, mid-1900s, late 1900s, the romanticism of the American West was very rampant in our culture and in our entertainment. Those were the glory days of Clint Eastwood, and John Wayne, and a lot of the, the great Westerns. What wasn't really on people's forefront back then were ecosystem health. You know, this was before the Endangered Species Act was even created. That was in 1973. So the, the understanding of perennial grasslands, of riparian habitats, of how are ecosystems functions in the West - it still wasn't fully understood, and it's still not fully understood today.

Ben Masters [00:53:18] But hindsight's 20-20. But I think at that, at that point in time in the '70s, whenever the Wild Horse Act was passed, you know, let's be honest, it is impossible not to look at a herd of like 300 horses running across the desert and not be stirred in your soul. And I think it tapped into that American love and romanticism of the American West, and that's why the Act was passed. I think that's, I think that it's a good thing that it was passed. It's just a shame that, that that we weren't able to put together a good management plan to where the horses, and the perennial grasses, and the riparian habitats, and all the other critters could find a better equilibrium. And it's become so controversial.

David Todd [00:54:18] Yeah, yeah. So I think you mentioned that a lot of these horses, other than those that are in the, these holding facilities and leased pastures are out in the Great Basin, in some of these very dry areas. But my understanding is that at one point, and this, I guess goes back to the 1800s, they were in Texas. And you know, you look at some of these, these old maps and they refer to the "Wild Horse Desert" and "Mustang Island". And I was curious if, you know, as you've read and thought about mustangs, if you've looked into that at all - the sort of career of the mustang in Texas?

Ben Masters [00:55:08] I have, a fair amount, actually. And to be honest, there's not that much really good history about it, that's not also borderline on the, the myth and lore. You know, a lot of people point back to J. Frank Dobie, his book "The Mustangs", and there's certainly some, some really good historical references. He, you know, he claims that there may have been two million horses in Texas and on the Great Plains, but obviously there's no way that you could actually do a population estimate back then. But, but that would indicate that there was, you know, vast numbers of horses across Texas and you know, with the Wild Horse Desert in South Texas, that sand sheet country. That was certainly, you know, a reason why they called it that.

Ben Masters [00:56:12] But I would imagine that the wild horse history is somewhat similar to our Longhorn history of, you know, Texas up until about 1860s or so whenever the Comanche were pushed out of, out of their homeland and onto reservations, there was vast swaths of the state that was unsafe for Texans and Americans to travel in. And it was in a lot of those areas that you had, you know, these huge populations of longhorns and, and also horses that were just living their existence and evolving or adapting or the survival of the fittest. You

know, it didn't go back from a species standpoint, but there are certainly many, many generations where, you know, only the toughest animals survived.

Ben Masters [00:57:13] And it wasn't until, until the Comanches were placed under the reservation, or diminished to such an extent where a lot of that stuff along the Caprock, and West of Uvalde, and really South Texas. It wasn't until they figured out how to get water down there till people really moved into that country. But, you know, that's, that's where you had your origination with a lot of the famous cattle trails, your Goodnight, Loving, and these big 20-year periods where they're gathering all these Longhorns that were just running wild in the brush, and out on the grass. You know, there was horses out there, too. And, you know, they'd push them up to Kansas to hit with the railroad lines and, you know, following the cattle drives before all the barbed wire fences.

Ben Masters [00:58:10] But, yeah, in Texas, we didn't, we didn't have wild horses that made it through, through, through the, I guess, the taming of the Texas landscape, to my understanding, at least. But you know, their bloodlines are still in the horses that we have today. I mean, there's a lot of ranch horses all over the place that, you know, trace their heritage back a couple of hundred years into Texas. So their bloodlines are still there, but there's been many, many, many, many generations of animal husbandry and domestication to produce our more common breeds, like quarter horse, and the thoroughbred, or the popular stuff.

David Todd [00:58:55] That's interesting to hear the sort of ghosts of these, these Texas mustangs might be, you know, inhabiting these, these current horses that are, you know, domesticated and running around Texas.

David Todd [00:59:11] But so if I caught what you're saying earlier: after the Comanches were controlled and you know, folks wanted to start running cattle and stringing barbed wire, I think you said that that there were efforts to collect these wild horses and then move them along the cattle trails and up to, I guess, where'd it be, Kansas City or one of the stockyard areas? Is that right?

Ben Masters [00:59:42] To my understanding, there was not a large horse slaughter industry up in Kansas City or in the stockyards in the cattle drive days. But I would certainly imagine that there was a bunch of really punchy dudes back then that were able to catch those wild horses, and break them, and train them and use them as their own.

David Todd [01:00:09] So your feeling is that they probably, if they could capture them, they probably kept them, rather than trying to take them to slaughter and the meat market.

Ben Masters [01:00:19] Yeah, they're good horses, man. I mean, I've ridden them. I've got some of them. They're ... I mean, think about how much sense it would make. You've got an animal that has many, many generations of natural selection where they're living out there. Like my horses, they can do 50, 70 miles through the mountains without shoes before their feet begin to get sore. And you know, if I went and got average Joe's quarter horse from East Austin that stands around in the sand, and has been shod his entire life, I mean, it's going to chop straight through his feet.

Ben Masters [01:00:58] So, a lot of those a lot of those mustangs and a lot of the Indian ponies, you know, that the different Plains Indians had, I mean, they were, they're tough as nails. They had to be, or else they got shot or eaten.

David Todd [01:01:19] Yeah. So let's go, I guess, bring up what's going on currently. These horses that are, that are wild and out in the Great Basin and elsewhere, can you talk about some of the efforts to, to sort of manage those herds. I've understood that there's some work to sterilize some of them to try to keep the numbers down. Is that, is that part of the solution? Or do you think that's not significant?

Ben Masters [01:01:56] So I think it's worth saying, I sat for three years as the Wild Horse and Burro, on the Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board, where I represented the interests of wildlife management. I was the wildlife chair and represented wildlife on 31.2 million acres of public land. In my opinion, the efforts to use fertility control are somewhat of a distraction from looking at the root problem, which is we're 60,000 horses over the target population size. And we're spending $80 million a year, keeping them locked up in feed yards. And, you know, darting a hundred or even a thousand horses a year isn't going to put you on a path to sustainability. In my opinion, and I've gotten a lot of shit over this, is that the only way that we're going to get on a sustainable path forward is to have a lethal management option for the wild horses.

Ben Masters [01:03:06] And this is coming from somebody who literally has dedicated many years of their life into having somebody not say that. But that's just the reality that we're in. Or we can just say, "Well, let's just see what happens and enter into the new Pangaea and allow invasive species to propagate and give up on our native rangelands. Like, that's the choice that we are making right now.

Ben Masters [01:03:33] And I have gone and visited the herd management areas. I have seen millions of acres of those public lands. And I have seen millions and millions of acres of beautiful sagebrush, habitat that has been turned into nothing but an invasive species monoculture that doesn't support the wonderful diversity of wildlife that has existed there for tens of thousands of years. It is the worst case scenario and that exists on millions of acres of public lands.

Ben Masters [01:04:08] And to me, that's just such a shame. Nobody wins in that situation.

Ben Masters [01:04:14] And at the end of the day, it boils down to the fact that on our public lands, they're not being managed by best available science, they're being managed by lawsuits. And a lot of the lawsuits that are winning are from organizations that don't prioritize the health of the soil and the health of the land. They're prioritizing on, on, on animals, on animal rights.

Ben Masters [01:04:42] And I have lost so much respect for a lot of the wild horse activist organizations that fail to recognize that the very most important thing for the health of wild horses is healthy soils and a healthy rangeland. And they have just gotten into this ideology where it's horses versus cattle. And it's this competitive spirit whenever nobody's saying, "Hey, hey, stop. What about our soil health? What about the health of our perennial grasses? What about the health of our riparian areas? Shouldn't we be incredibly alarmed that the keystone species here, the sage grouse, is about to be listed as an endangered species?"

Ben Masters [01:05:32] Like it's so frustrating, the lack of acknowledgment from many different interest groups that care about animals that live on this ecosystem. But people don't actually look at the ecosystem, and what's necessary to make everything coexist.

Ben Masters [01:05:52] It, it, it, it has gotten to such a, to such a point, David, where I dedicated so many years of my life to figuring out this issue, that I had to give up because I recognize that it is so hopeless that I can't do anything to fix it. And that's why I moved on to other things. And that hurts to say that.

David Todd [01:06:18] Yeah, I can see how it would be frustrating.

David Todd [01:06:25] So I think you, you mentioned, when we were talking earlier that, that, there's kind of an analogous problem for burros, that's, that's kind of related and connected to the same issues that face the mustang, but I guess the burros are a problem here in Texas. Can you talk a little bit about that situation?

Ben Masters [01:06:55] I don't think that our situation with feral burros in West Texas even comes close to comparing to anything that's happening on some of these areas in Nevada. I mean, not even not even close. I mean, they had a big scandal. Gosh, I don't know, probably 10, 15 years ago, whenever there was a bunch of burros in Big Bend Ranch State Park, whenever I think that they'd be fully removed like 40 animals and there was a big, a big uproar over that. Well, we're talking, and we're talking about issues that they have out West, that's not on a 300,000 acre state park. We're talking about 30 million acres of public lands with sixty thousand horses and burros. It's just that at a scale that is so vastly different from anything that we have in Texas.

Ben Masters [01:07:56] And I mean, there's other there's other countries that are also battling this issue. And if you look at Australia, they have a completely different mentality on invasive species than, than the United States does. And I think a lot of that is because it's just a different culture there. I think that their, their environmentalists are very aggressive in protecting their native flora and fauna because it's a little bit more sensitive than, than the North American stuff. Like our wildlife and our wildlife habitat here is pretty resilient because there's been so much competition. But if you look at different islands where they haven't had that same degree of, of, of, of competitors or they've kind of built out some island specialists, whenever you introduce invasive species, they can just, just wreck and cause extinctions really quickly.

Ben Masters [01:08:57] So I mean, what they do in Australia is they just get a guy in a helicopter. And they drive around and they just shoot the horses until, until they get their numbers under control. And that's kind of where we're at, or where we're getting to, in, in the United States is if we actually want to manage the horses at a number where we want to get to them at. The, that's kind of one of the only options that, that we have is, is, is culling.

Ben Masters [01:09:35] Yeah. So what do you foresee for the mustangs in the U.S.?

Ben Masters [01:09:42] What I foresee in the mustangs in the United States is that our public lands management is often managed through lawsuits. And the ignorance of basic ecosystem services or basic ecosystem functions is so great in the United States, but our desire to help out animals is so high in the United States, that I think different wild horse activist organizations are going to become so powerful in saving the horse that they're going to raise enough money to successfully legally fight any type of realistic.