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The 250-Acre-an-Hour Dilemma

By Lori Teresa Yearwood

Remember the horse you rode as a child? The land that the two of you traveled—rolling hills, open fields, mountain trails. Wherever you went, you can still feel the wind across your face as you galloped the world.

All we had to do was climb aboard our horses and follow one of those country dirt roads to Heaven.

These are the memories so many of us hold dear...and these are the memories that will never be relived or recreated. The reason is as stark as it is simple: Those wide open spaces no longer exist. The informal country roads have been bulldozed and paved over, the meadows and trails transformed into strip malls, making way for urban development.

This development, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, is swallowing open land in this country at an average rate of 250 acres an hour.

Try, for a moment, to comprehend what 250 acres an hour actually looks like.

Picture the famous Kentucky Horse Park—1,100 expansive acres filled with arenas, tracks and fields. At 250 acres an hour, the park would disappear between lunch and dinner.

At 250 acres an hour, the impact on equestrians from all walks of life and in all disciplines is direct and intense.

Understanding the Impact

“I grew up where we raced our horses up and down the canyons. I could ride my horse to the beach and then on the beach,” said David Adamo, an eventing trainer who lives in Alabama. “Now, its all strip malls and developments and traffic lights, and there

is no riding allowed on that beach I used to ride on as a kid.”

“I grew up riding in the backyards of peoples’ houses,” said Dayna Lynd-Pugh of Tres Pino, CA. “We could ride bareback for hours on end, riding through hills, jumping logs. All those roads got paved away.”

To relate what has happened in Lynd-Pugh’s lifetime to what happened during her mother’s lifetime—and what is likely to happen in her own children’s lifetime—Lynd-Pugh only has to think about how when her mother was a child, she rode horseback through the country roads and open fields of San Francisco.

“Imagine that,” Lynd-Pugh said with a sigh.

“As we drive from home to the training barn and see the bulldozers, somehow, we just pass it by and we don’t understand the significance of it,” said Deb Balliet, Executive Officer for the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource (ELCR) in Lexington, KY.

The ELCR is a non-profit that was founded in 1997 by a group of horse people who believe that the loss of open land in this country is the greatest threat to the future of equestrian sport, recreation and industry.

Consider that according to the American Horse Council, there are nine million horses in the United States alone, Balliet pointed out. Then understand that some four acres are required for one horse to grow enough hay and grain to sustain one horse, Balliet said. “That means this country alone needs 36 million acres to sustain our horses.”

Yet the world’s urban population is expected to rise from three billion in 2003 to five billion by 2030, with rural populations concurrently declining, according to the United Nation’s Population Division report *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2003 Revision*.

If these numbers still feel too big to relate to in everyday equestrian life, Adamo, the eventing trainer in Alabama, turns the impact of the 250-acre-an-hour statistic into a topic that every rider everywhere can relate to: safety on the back of a horse.

Relating to the Impact

As a trainer, and someone involved in the sport of eventing on a national level for more than 25 years, Adamo sees a direct correlation between urbanization of land, the ensuing lack of land and the resulting inability of riders to fully prepare for competition.

“People aren’t riding in the open anymore, they’re riding in arenas and very controlled conditions,” he said. “Less and less do they have the opportunity to experience their horses and certain situations out in the open terrain. So they are experiencing these situations for the first time in competitive situations.”

Take, for example, the people who must learn to go beyond the speed of a hand gallop, but have nowhere to build up this speed except inside an arena.

Unable to race their ponies up and down hills like Adamo did as a child, and unable to experience the sensation of going fast and then slow in the bottom of, say, a California canyon, riders do the best they can in their training sessions.

“But you can’t build the kind of speed that you can in the wide open terrain that you can in an arena,” Adamo pointed out. “You don’t have the same elements—the wind, the trees, the new situations. So they have to learn to hand gallop for the first time in the competition. And obviously there is a learning curve there.”

Those who have access to open land, Adamo said, have a certain edge above those who don’t.



David Stockman



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Do Something...

Yes, the statistic is alarming—we’re losing 250 acres an hour of open land in this country. But, if you are an equestrian and you want to preserve land for your horse, as well as future generations of equines, being alarmed is not enough.

Here are a few things you can do:

- Become involved in community land use processes. For example, watch zoning and planning meeting schedules. So, when developers plan on building a mall on the last open lot in your neighborhood, you won’t be blindsided.
- Consider selling or donating development rights of your property. To learn how to do this, contact your local land trust. One thing to be especially careful to include is specific language that relates to horses and equestrian use of the land. For example: “And horses shall be allowed for fox hunting,” or “People may trail ride here.”
- If you compete and there is a local horse park in your area, become actively involved in making sure it is healthy and viable. In other words, donate what you can.
- Take care of the land you and your horse use. Apparently small gestures at a horse event matter. People who allow you to come onto their land are taking a risk. So do what you can to keep the invitation to equestrians open.

Ride carefully across other’s land. Remember that it is now a privilege that must be granted by a landowner.

Knowing what is to be built in your area can allow you to be proactive in protecting land.

“It sounds silly, but that’s what we’re talking about with the competitive edge. It’s a dilemma,” he continued. “People want awards. They want that competitive edge. But at the same time they are scared to death and it’s not a good match.”

From the backyard trail rider to the high level competitor—the need for land is something that unites all horse owners.

“We require land, and we require it within a reasonable distance within major urban centers, and we require it at a reasonable price,” Adamo said. “There’s no way of getting around it.”

Riders that try to find ways to function outside of that reality, run solidly into yet another problem: the essential nature and need of the horse.



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The Horses Without Land

Two years ago, Tony Leahy, a fox hunting master and horse trainer who moved to the United States from Ireland, met a horse who had never tasted a blade of grass.

“I bought him from a show barn in Florida, where he had been nose-to-nose with only his mother. From the time he was weaned, he lived in a stall or a small dirt lot or an indoor arena. It took that horse a month to realize that he could eat grass.”

Leahy bought the horse—a Dutch Warmblood—for a bargain, as by the time the horse was five, the horse “was almost insane.”

“Fast Eddy” cribbed and weaved. His entire body was knotted with muscle tension.

“His environment,” Leahy said, “had created a monster.”

With two years of rehabilitation, lots of turnout and a herd life, “Fast Eddy” found a productive life in fox hunting. He is happy now, and a success story that Leahy uses to underscore the necessity of land—and lots of it—when it comes to horsekeeping.

“I make my money from horses,” Leahy said. “I believe that it is economically productive for me to provide my horses with the most productive environment for them. They live in fields, not in 10x10 stalls or 20x20 paddocks.”

To protect his investment—and his lifestyle—Leahy has signed an easement in which his more than 200 acres of farmland are “devoted in perpetuity” to horses. He devotes much of his time to serving on the boards of both the Masters of the Fox Hounds Association and the board of the ELCR.

Horse keeping, foxhunting, land conservation and the management of land development—these interests are inter-related for Leahy. The latter protects—and he hopes—ensures the existence of the former.

With homes in Southeast Georgia and Northwest Illinois, he has managed to escape the encroachment of urbanization. His foxhunts are not stopped midway because a fox has run out of his natural

habitat and into a suburban neighborhood during the event—an increasingly common occurrence for many foxhunters in the Northeast.

“I have chosen to live a lifestyle in a very remote place in which I do not take the keys out of my truck, and I do not have access to a Starbucks,” Leahy said. “It’s what brings me fulfillment.”

A Compromise?

Some people, however, do not want to live as remotely as Leahy. They want horses, and they want city amenities—or at least suburban amenities.

A neighborhood may pop up any time on open land used by riders.



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“And the truth of the matter is that as long as there is demand, there will be supply,” said Jennifer Donovan, co-founder of Equestrian Services, LLC, a management company that works with land developers to design “turn-key” equestrian properties.

“In the perfect world, we would just stop development and nothing will happen after that,” Donovan said. “But that is unrealistic. Our population is exploding.”

So why not work to show and teach developers how to develop land in an environmentally sensitive way, a way in which “density does not equal dollars,” Donovan suggested. The idea is catching on. There are more than 350 equestrian communities in the country—triple the number in the last three to five years.

“People desire to connect with nature and the rhythms of nature. There is urbanization and there is suburbanism with its cookie-cutter houses and strip malls. Suburbanism has failed.

“Equestrian Services offers a new ruralism,” said Donovan.

Their newest development, O’Connor Signature at The Oaks of Lake City in Lake City, FL, will offer more than 260 acres of open space and 15 miles of equestrian trails that are “guaranteed for perpetuity.” Equestrian riding fields, rings and riding parks will also be interspersed throughout the community, allowing residents, company literature boasts: “to live the country lifestyle while protecting land and making a sound investment in their horses’ future.”

At 1,200 acres in size, the development contains 236 lots, with barn boarding fees starting at \$625 a month and homeowners maintenance fees at \$150 a month.

Equestrian land conservationists seem neither overly critical nor approving of the new wave of equestrian communities. Rather, they are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. “Some are really good and some are just feigning concern for the environment and the horses,” said Balliet with the ELCR.

Temporary Refuge

For now, Lynd-Pugh and her family is happy. They have left the crowded city of her childhood and moved to Tres Pino, CA...what used to be the boonies.

Here, on 115 acres, the horses have huge turnouts and Lynd-Pugh and her clients have plenty of room to train for eventing competitions, with rolling hills to condition on, flat land to gallop across.

Lynd-Pugh is happy, but at the same time worried.

“My mother grew up riding in San Francisco and had horses in the city. As she grew up it got harder and harder for her to ride. I grew up in Woodside, in the Portola Valley. It was horsy and open and then it was paved and crowded. My daughter rides and competes. But who knows where she is going to keep her horses in the future.”

Last night, Lynd-Pugh heard from a friend in Gilroy. The barn where she spent her teenage years is in jeopardy of losing its permit because the town is questioning whether it wants horses on that land.

“So they are asking everybody to go to the meeting and plead for the horses. “Of course I will go. But I am sad,” she said. “I feel the horse and its place in this country is being forgotten.” ■



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As suburbia creeps into farmland, horse owners are losing precious land for their animals and for recreational use.

Lori Teresa Yearwood is a Pulitzer-nominated journalist and magazine writer based in Oregon. Among her passions is “an all natural horse journey and the lessons that horses teach us.” Her writings on the topic can be found at www.NaturalHorseJourney.typepad.com.