

Chapter 1:

Creating a Natural Environment

The first main topic covered in this book is providing a natural way of living for your horse. This encompasses creating a more natural living environment, dealing with poisonous plants, seasonal considerations for health, and proper hydration.

In creating a more natural environment, focus on providing free movement with a companion, a stimulating living area, and allowing your horse to adapt to his environment naturally. Each of these practices are easy to apply.

One minute he was grazing, stepping along at a snail's pace, while nibbling on the succulent grass tops. The next minute, the dark dapple gray realized the herd was gone. Where was his herd? A panic like no other shook his very insides and he realized he was ALONE. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he ran to the top of the hill in search of his beloved herd. He spotted them, ran full speed toward them, whinnying loudly, then slipped into the middle of the group where he again felt safe.

Horses are herd animals, so being separated from others of their kind will cause them stress and anxiety. Being part of a herd, even if it's only one other horse, is a strong instinctual drive because it imparts a sense of safety—there is safety in numbers. Horses have evolved and survived because of this herd concept; a wild horse that became separated from his herd often perished, so a life of solitary confinement goes against the grain of equine nature.

As the rest of the herd dozed lazily in the afternoon sun, the gray gelding and donkey had other ideas. It was playtime and both had excess energy surging through their bodies. Now was the perfect time to release it, and a quick nip to the rump of the dark gray signaled the start of play. He responded with a kick of both hind feet aimed at the instigator's chest. But instead of a bone-crushing impact, both of his feet stopped short as if to say, "I could have gotten you." The next weapon of choice was teeth. They stood next to each other, taking turns trying to nip the other's face. Although the sound of clamping teeth could be heard, not once did those sharp teeth ever tear the skin; only small tufts of hair occasionally floated to the ground.



Riley and Simon.

Many people believe that if horses are turned out together, they will hurt each other, but this isn't usually the case. Horses need company, and need to touch and play with one another. Although they will play games of dominance to determine hierarchy within the herd, actual contact is minimal, at least by horse standards. Often, when a domestic horse is termed "unsociable" by us, it is a result of a lack of socialization skills with other equines. If horses were truly anti-social

creatures, why would their cousins in the wild choose to establish herds? It's because they have an instinctual need for safety, comfort and companionship, and the herd provides these.

Socializing involves touch and communication, and constantly takes place within the herd. Nuzzling, scratching, lipping, playing, and just standing close all help to establish strong bonds. Also, because horses love to play, a good round of rearing and biting will raise their spirits and strengthen their bodies.

A horse can only learn appropriate equine behavior by being with other horses and watching



Nuzzling, scratching, lipping, or just standing close helps establish strong bonds.

their body language. It isn't something humans can teach. However, it's important to introduce new horses gradually, using common sense, for their safety.

A stimulating environment is key

When the draft colt first arrived, navigating the uneven, rocky terrain was a challenge. Coming from a small pen with soft footing, he'd never had the chance to think about where to place his feet. In fact, he had never been able to move faster than a couple of steps at the trot. In his new surroundings, his muscles became sore, his hooves chipped badly and he was at a complete disadvantage in the horse play games.

Ideally, we would all have at least 100 acres for our horses to roam. This is rarely possible, but even a small property can offer a natural environment. A natural living area should provide your horse with enough room for continuous movement except during rest and sleep. Horses are built to move, and in the wild will cover a minimum of 10 to 15 miles a day.

When not able to exercise, body circulation is hindered, causing systemic problems in the legs and feet. When a horse moves, blood from the hoof and lower leg is pumped back through the body to the heart by the hoof and tendon action. In order to have strong, healthy feet and legs, a horse needs constant freedom of movement. This activity also exercises and strengthens the muscles and joints and promotes healthy gut function, helping to cut down on the risk of impaction colic and other digestive disorders.

Unfortunately, many horses are confined to small pens or even worse, box stalls. Not only does this hinder the horse physically, but it also affects his mental well-being. The horse is naturally very perceptive and curious, so standing in a stall day and night becomes boring and unsettling. Having nothing else to do, he turns to "vices" such as



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cribbing, pawing and pacing, and eventually these behaviors can become habitual. Once the horse is liberated from his “jail,” however, many of these habits disappear.

Give your horse as much room as possible and don't be afraid of uneven ground, hills and rocks, or fallen logs, shrubs and trees. It is human nature to assume that what *we* find comfortable is also good for the horse, so we think we should level their living area and remove rocks and other “dangers.” This means the horse has nothing left to do but mindlessly wander between his feed and water areas. How could this be physically or mentally stimulating?

We ask our horses to go out on trail rides and expect them to be sure-footed but we may never have given them a chance to learn how to place their feet and find their balance beforehand. We add the weight of a saddle and rider (often an unbalanced one), and expect them to keep us safe. What a burden to place on our riding partners. A more challenging environment can easily be created. Obstacles often can be obtained for free, including rocks or branches from trees and shrubs. You can pick up logs from specialized lumberyards often for free from their scrap pile—but don't use wood that splinters or that has been treated with chemicals. Grow some native plants, many of which have excellent beneficial properties, and plant trees and shrubs of various heights and sizes for horses to scratch against.

Provide toys to stimulate your horse's mind. There are numerous specialty horse toys on the market, such as Equi-Spirit balls, though homemade and readily available “toys” work just as well: orange traffic cones, plastic garbage cans, barrels, even a milk jug hung from above.

A naturally challenging environment, with plenty of time to run and play in it, enables a horse to learn to use his body. This is paramount both for his sake and his rider's, since finding his balance and knowing how to move his feet independently around obstacles is not necessarily inborn. Only through practice and by trial and error can he become handy with his body. And in order to learn, there must be a challenge.



Toys, such as the Equi-Spirit ball, can be used to stimulate your horse's mind.

There are exceptions to the previous section on turnout and living with a herd. According to Mary Ann Simonds, BS, MA, Equine Behaviorist, if a horse has lived in a stall alone most of his life, this has become his safety. Turning him right out in a large open area with other horses can actually be very stressful for him. Take a lot of extra time getting him accustomed to this change, ensuring his well-being.

Adapting naturally to environmental changes

Although the winter had been a harsh one, our ragtag herd had actually enjoyed the reprise from the summer heat and insects. Their long, wooly coats protected them from the biting winds, and food had been generous enough to give them some extra fat for warmth.

As the seasons change, a lot of people feel they need to help their horses adjust. In the summer, many horses are kept in a cool climate-controlled barn. In the winter, warmth is provided with blankets and heaters. For more on seasonal considerations, see chapter 3. Again, what we consider comfortable is not necessarily healthy for horses. In fact, the best protection a horse can have is his natural hair coat. Horses don't normally seek out a closed-in shelter. They are able to deal with seasonal changes naturally because their coats insulate them against both heat and cold. They can also actually raise, lower, or turn their coat hairs to warm or cool themselves. Blanketing not only interferes with these processes and that of hair growth, but may also cause the horse to get so hot he sweats, even in cold weather. His legs, belly, and head are not covered and to keep these areas from getting chilled, his whole body warms up, thus causing him to sweat under the blanket. In short, both blanketing and indoor climate control interfere with a horse's natural defenses against the elements.

A storm was brewing in the distance; large dark clouds were billowing in the sky. Being able to feel this weather change with his super sensitive whiskers, the lead gray began to move his herd toward a more protected area. Because the humidity was increasing, blood-sucking ear bugs began to look for victims. However, the fuzzy eared natural herd was too well protected from them by Mother Nature and her grand design.

Clipping ear hairs and whiskers and trimming manes and tails are more common grooming practices that interfere with the horse's ability to protect himself. It might make the horse *look* tidier, but clipping ear hairs allows dirt, foreign matter, wind, rain, insects and more to enter the ear canal, so we are in fact taking away his natural defenses. Many types of gnats often feed inside the ear, causing a horse to violently shake his head, or work himself into a frenzy. Trimming his mane and tail limits a horse's ability to combat flying insects, while clipping the whiskers takes away his ability to sense his surroundings.



Natural ear hair helps keep dirt, foreign matter and insects out of the ear canal.

Summary

- Give your horse a companion to play with and learn from, even if it means adopting a retired or senior horse.
- Allow him room to roam on natural terrain—even a small paddock, round pen or arena equipped with toys is better than a box stall.
- Permit your equine partner to adapt to environmental changes without hindrance.
- Just think naturally and the changes will come easily.