

Solitary Confinement

by Glenn Wilson © June 2007

Hello!

My name is Snowy. Humans call me a pony. I'm naturally light grey in colour and have seen about sixteen summers. When I was one year old the humans gelded me. It didn't hurt much and my humans say it is much better for me to be that way. I wonder if they get gelded?

Anyway, my home is a piece of land the humans call a vacant block. I live here by myself. I have human shelters on three sides of my home and a road at the front of my block. It's pretty boring most of the time as my small human has grown and is apparently more interested in another human than me these days. They both came and visited me a while ago but I didn't really take to *him* very much. I still like my small human because she is good for nice tasting treats when she visits. I wish she would talk in a normal human voice though (or even better, use her imagination and mind and we could then have a real conversation). But the treats are nice. I really like apples.

Loneliness is what gets to me. Life is dull when you live alone in a small paddock - day in, day out boredom. Apparently there are several other of my type who live like this in this town and the rumour is that our type are treated to solitary confinement all over the world. At least I have a bit of room to move around in, not like some bigger ponies who are called 'elite'. They live in a box! Just room enough to stand. They eat, sleep, poo and pee in this box. That would be really awful. It must drive them mental! I think humans call it 'stall crazy'. I hope I never become 'elite'.

Instinctively I know I would be much happier living with others of my type. Yes, I know there would be fights and disagreements but because we ponies don't hold grudges and really live for the moment, we would get over them pretty quickly. Life is too short to waste holding grudges, I reckon. Apparently humans themselves are put into small boxes by when they are bad. Punishment they call it and I have no idea what that means.

If I did live with others of my type I reckon a really big paddock would be heaven. Got a message from some other cousins that they live in an area where there are *no fences*. Wow! And it's bigger than they can cross in a day of fast walking. The food there is a mixture of grasses, bushes, shrubs and flowers. They have clear water to drink from the many creeks and springs, shelter from the weather in amongst the snow gums and when the wind is really cold and strong they leave the big wide paddock at the bottom of the sky and head down into the bush lined valleys. The cousins are healthy, happy and free. What a life! None of them are gelded either.

Anyway, back to my lot. I used to go out with humans on a fairly regular basis. They would come and get me, using treats so I would get close enough to them so they could put a thing on my face to which a rope was attached. Then they would finally take my overcoat off. What a relief that was; smelly, hot, uncomfortable thing that it is. They'd brush me, trim some hair off my face, feet and neck and generally pretty me up. It became fairly predictable really because after the 'grooming' I would then be led over to the cave on wheels. The big human would stand at the opening of the cave with wheels and begin talking to me in a funny human voice, much like the little human uses. This doesn't last too long and pretty soon a human emotion called frustration creeps in to the big

human's voice. The frustration comes with stronger pulling on the rope, glaring looks at me, leading up to a bit of a fight. I just stand there, feet planted. No way do I feel comfortable with the big human looking and acting like a predator at the entrance of a cave. He usually growls a bit too. After some of this they get really exasperated and give up. Then I feel safer about going into the cave. As soon as I do though they slam the entrance closed behind me, which gives me a bit of a fright.

The cave begins to rattle and sway and after some time it all stops and the entrance is cleared and I can't wait to see who else is there so I rush my way out of the cave backwards. This usually causes more shouting and mayhem by the humans. And there are more ponies at this big paddock but I'm not really supposed to talk to them or smell them although some of them smell really nice though. Sniffing takes place when the humans are not paying too much attention. We usually have a good day with the small human on my back but I do get hungry and thirsty, as I prefer to eat and drink on a regular basis. When the sun gets lower in the sky we all go through the 'cave thing' again and before you know it I am back in my solitary confinement.

Word is that the humans who lock us ponies up in solitary confinement do not really understand our needs. Take food for example. My high country cousins eat, walk, snooze, drink and eat, walk, snooze and drink all day and night. They have a variety of plants to eat that give them energy, help them grow, keep most of the bugs out of their bellies and some they just eat for a treat.

We solitary ponies are given a strange lot of feed. What does grow in our paddocks tastes pretty yuk. Sometimes the humans spray these plants with an even worse tasting liquid. That is usually when the purple and yellow flowers are just about finished. The humans do it every year. And what does grow in our paddocks that should taste nice is usually a bit off - sort of sour tasting. Most of the year though the paddock is quite bare apart from some really bad tasting plants. So the humans give us a bit of this and a bit of that. Sometimes they forget to feed us at all and we are forced to grovel in the dirt for anything that is digestible. So instead of having a reasonably full belly most of the time, I have periods when I am so hungry my guts hurt and my feet get sore.

Speaking of feet; when I was popular with my small human, a big human used to visit every now and then and nail metal 'shoes' onto the bottom of my feet. I could never understand why they did this as my feet would go cold, I couldn't feel the ground anymore, they were slippery and after a while my feet hurt and boy, did they smell. There is no big human doing that to my wild free cousins, I'll bet. Lately though my feet have been pretty messy. I don't get the shoes nailed on anymore but my feet just keep growing until they break off in big chunks - and it really hurts when these bits come off. I have splits, cracks, flaring and my frogs are a bit daggy too. When I have difficulty walking around my small paddock because my feet and legs are so sore, the humans come along and trim my feet. It sure does feel better for a while but the splits on the sides of my hooves go right up to the hair and with each step it irritates and hurts. I wonder who trims my wild free cousins feet?

The visits by the humans seem to be connected to the weather nowadays. The hotter it is the less I see of them. If it rains for days on end they are nowhere to be seen. And when the cold months are here and the days short, I rarely see them at all.

I often dream of what it would be like if all of us town solitary ponies got together and were allowed to run in a big paddock with trees, creeks and dams and a

choice of grasses. In my dream the humans also leave a big bale of dried grass in our big paddock so that we never have to go hungry. I heard that it's called herd life. There is enough room on the edge of town to do this. Some lucky ponies actually live like that. Boy we could have fun. We could take it in turns keeping a lookout while the others rested. We could play. We could socialise and teach each other pony stuff. We could even help any mothers bring up their young. What a dream! I wonder why the humans don't let us live like that? Perhaps it's because they live in small herds in small caves or shelters that they don't understand what true freedom is. I wonder.

Getting back to the rug thing: When I was the object of attention of the little human, they used to keep me dressed, sort of like themselves. I am not ashamed of my nakedness but they insisted in dressing me up in a variety of uncomfortable rugs. I often undressed myself, which made the humans very unhappy. I thought, I'm happy undressed and they are unhappy. Why? Sometimes when the weather was nice and we didn't do our weekly trip in the cave with wheels, I would have the rug left off me. I liked that. I would roll in the dirt and get rid of all the itches on my own skin. The dirt in my coat felt great too. Better than when the humans used to wash me. These days I don't wear the rugs much in the warmer parts of the year but come the cooler times, I have a grotty old rug on all the time. I don't particularly like that but because my block doesn't have any trees to stop the wind, I am a little warmer. "Horses for courses", the humans say. Whatever that means. And by the way if there were trees on my block I could get some shelter from the sun too.

I may sound like an unhappy creature and if the truth were known, I am unhappy. But that is my decision, being unhappy, that is. One day I will change the way I feel about living in solitary confinement or one day my humans may realise that the way they have me living is not the best for me. I can only dream.

So next time you pass me or another pony like me standing in a paddock by ourselves, looking wistfully at nothing, acting bored, think that we are probably dreaming of a herd existence. It would be nice.

Solitary Confinement - Part Two.

'Horses are herd animals'. This is not such a surprising statement to a great number of horse owners and people with an interest in horses. Nevertheless, how this understanding is manifested in the wider horse world shows either a lack of acceptance of what this means for a horse or perhaps innocence or ignorance in many horse - human relationships.

Being a herd animal means nothing less than "I am most comfortable when I live with a number of others of my type". My interpretation of the statement 'horses are a herd animal' is that for their mental and physical well being, horses need the constant company, interaction, security, communication, stimulus, relationship, instinct reinforcement and training that being with their type can give. No 'ifs or buts'. Sheep, goats and cattle do not suffice as suitable companion animals for horses. Humans are social creatures, dogs are a pack animal, and most birds are flock creatures. It is the way nature has set up species to survive and to thrive. It certainly works with humans, although smaller tribes are probably more appropriate for our wellbeing than cities of millions of people.

If we, as horse carers and owners, compromise, modify or deviate in any way horses' living arrangements and social/herd needs, there will be a resultant change in the horse. Again, no 'ifs or buts'. To be really objective in this

exercise, we cannot take the 'solitary' horse as a benchmark. To do so would be akin to examining something with a compromised standard of compliance. How do we know such things as love if we have not experienced love in its fullest and most pure form? How do we know the true nature of our horse if we do not let him/her fully express himself or herself as a horse?

Here is where imagination, observation, education and exploration can assist us to find our true horse. For example, imagine a high-level dressage horse being able to live for the majority of time out in a big paddock (or better still a Paddock Paradise*) with several other equine buddies. Perhaps gallopers and pacers too would benefit from spending their 'off work' time in similar living arrangements? Compare that type of scenario with that which is so common and so detrimental to these horses today. The all too often 'solitary confinement' athlete, pony or pet horse is just a mere whisper of a true and happy horse.

Herd living for horses can be achievable if we, as their owners, carers and users, can step outside of 'what is convenient for us' thinking. And how many examples of unsocialised horses do we see at horse/human get-togethers? The orange ribbon in the tail scenario! Horse riders and handlers do not even let horses get to know each other, to sniff each other, to say 'Hi, and who are you?' to other horses. Why? Why not? I reckon it is lack of understanding of horses and horses' needs that cause this type of human reaction to a horse wanting to do or doing what horses naturally do.

Solutions. There are a lot of free companion horses available all the time. People who have horses that are no longer useful for their purpose publish "Free to a good home" adverts; they can't afford to feed it and care for it (or they no longer want to). For every horse thus advertised I bet there are many others in similar circumstances. In a wonderful example of companion horse situation, I was given the care of a little pony last year. This fellow had someone else's aged Anglo for company. When we went to pick up the little one, his old mate was less than happy when we shut the pony inside the float. My partner and I looked at each other and in that funny way of 'knowing', both headed for the rear of the float and both dropped the tailgate of the float without saying a word. I look back on my first ever 'liberty load' with a sense of awe. Yes, so strong was his need for company, Ben just charged onto the float to be with his little mate. He knew we were taking him away. As it turned out, the true owners of Ben were quite happy for us to take him to a new home (so we didn't get done for horse stealing). But even better than that is the fact that this 'old' horse has taught me so much about horses. He is the most cooperative and gentle horse of the herd (he lives in a herd now) especially when I trim his feet, and I mean he is *really cooperative*. He is a true treasure to have in my life, and in the herd. (That last sentence should really be the other way around, but I *am* human).

So arranging some company for your horse is pretty straightforward. It's you who has to move out of your comfort zone for the horse to move into theirs. Try shared agistment (you can get over the 'feed issues' too), or acquiring a companion horse, or moving your horse from its small paddock living to a larger shared paddock, or even adopting a brumby from the organization that saves and rehuses the excess horses from the wilds. <www.victorianbrumbyassociation.org> So move your horse out of your back yard or stable living, now! Well, do it tomorrow then! If that's where/how he lives.

On one side of the horse/human relationship pendulum are those who have, house and use horses in a way that really makes me cringe. On the other side of this swing are people like Robert Miller, Bruce Nock, Carlos Tabernaberi, Linda

Kohanov, Pat Parelli, Monty Roberts and Jamie Jackson, just to name a few (no I am not name dropping but I have read or studied their books and information). What these and many others in the world are attempting to do is to wake us humans up to the horse. When we humans do wake up properly to the horse, we may just wake up to ourselves, and that will be a fine day for humanity. But I digress.

In Australia there is increasing interest in our own wild horse herds. Brumbies, as we affectionately call them, have more than managed to survive in the most extreme climates you could imagine. From the coldest snow covered alpine peaks to the harshest deserts in the centre of Australia, brumbies live in natural herds, eat naturally (and have great hooves) and in a great example of adaptability, thrive.

*Paddock Paradise is a recently released book written by American horse liberator (I hope he doesn't mind me calling him that) Jamie Jackson. Jackson has spearheaded the American barehoof movement. As a foundation in the book he bases his knowledge and understanding of horses on the 'wild horse model', believing it to be the soundest, problem free and most natural example of horse and one to which we should all aspire to for our horses.

In Paddock Paradise, J.J. takes the reader back to the wild horse lands of the Great Basin in the US, the home of wild mustang bands. We follow these bands throughout their 'ranges' and examine the behaviour of these horses in and between herds or families. Jackson also looks at diet, movement, seasons, threats and socialising behaviour of these wild animals. The very exciting thing for horse owners is how he has applied this knowledge to enable all horse owners to achieve sound, healthy and happy horses in domestic environments. All that is needed is knowledge, creativity and imagination (and some fencing material). It is an enlightening read. It is for the horse.

Something that many horse owners miss out on is just sitting down near a herd of horses and watching them. True, they do spend a fair amount of time with their noses in the grass eating. But even while this is going on there is other stuff going on. It can be subtle and it can be quite loud. It can also be very amusing too. Horse interactions are fascinating. Observing this going on between horses allows us to identify patterns and themes. And guess what? We may be able to use or mimic these actions ourselves to elicit a response from our horse when we are playing/training them. Or has someone already discovered that? I'll bet they have!

So if the horse is really happy then surely our relationship with him/her is going to be better. Each and every one of us should aim for a true paddock paradise, for the horse of course.

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