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What Is Natural Horsemanship?

Look up the adjective *natural* in the Chambers paperback dictionary and you will find two inches of text, leading you from pertaining to, produced by, according to nature, and on through a variety of definitions ending with illegitimate! The definition of the word natural for this text is *according to nature*.

For those people who wish to adopt a natural approach to horsemanship, the owner's requirements of the horse need to be considered. What do you expect from your horse? Do you wish to compete, and if so, at what level? The demands of top competition are now such that to win, athletes, unfortunately, need to manipulate their physical abilities often using substances which enhance their performance. Your naturally kept horse will undoubtedly be healthy and happy but is unlikely to win at Badminton or Olympia as natural living does not demand performance to those levels. If you are content to work and live with a horse, appreciating that there will be performance limits, then it is to be hoped that both you and your horse will have a lot of fun, enjoying life and companionship by behaving as nature intended rather than as man has demanded.

What do we mean if we endeavour to employ *natural* methods, remembering it is not just training we should consider, but also horse husbandry and the general, overall care of the horse including diet and living conditions. Is it possible to fully embrace *natural* in the true sense of the word, or is it best to take currently available information on horses living in natural circumstances (Fig. 1.1), the feral and remaining wild horses, as well as from archeological investigation and adapt it as far as possible to twenty-first century living conditions?

Unfortunately, no one knows the exact dietary requirements of the horse. Archaeology has traced the migrations of the various breeds and it appears that over the millennia various adaptations have taken place in the horse. Just as the kidneys of the camel have evolved to allow it to drink highly salted water, the Shetland pony living in its natural island environment and described in one book as being 'able to carry a man and his wife eight miles out in a day and eight miles back', can thrive on a seaweed diet. Other breeds would die rapidly if this were the only food on offer. One of the most important considerations of natural horsemanship is diet – 'what you do not put in you do not get out'.

Consider the following features available to a horse living in natural conditions:

- Eating a variety of herbage growing in soil uncontaminated by chemicals designed by humans.
- Sourcing and drinking fresh water, unpolluted by additives such as fluoride.
- Enjoying almost unlimited space and herd companionship.
- Living without rugs.
- Living without stable shelter.



Fig. 1.1 Natural living conditions are still enjoyed by the Exmoor pony.

If we then return to the dictionary definition of natural, *according to nature*, it rapidly becomes obvious, that it is almost impossible in the twenty-first century to re-establish the completely natural environment of the original horse; pollution, the human population explosion, modern, intensive farming methods, the loss of old pastures, and the arrival of motorised transport are all cogs in the wheel of failure.

The time when the horse lived in large family groups, roamed vast tracts of the world, moving not only in tune with the seasons, but also in search of better forage, to replace minerals, finding these in certain rock outcrops, and to find fresh water, has long past. Even in places like Mongolia, where, until very recently the herds moved with the human family groups, the quad bike has appeared and in addition, climatic changes have resulted in sand storms burying vast areas of previously grazed areas. The last refuges of natural horsemen, in the true sense, have all but disappeared.

While the exponents of natural horsemanship should not be criticised, those purporting to embrace the art should remember that they are a long way from their natural beginnings. Man no longer uses many of the senses with which the species *homo sapiens* is naturally endowed. In reality, these senses are not lost but they are underdeveloped, for civilisation has led to us no longer needing acute hearing, in-depth observation, a well-developed sense of smell, intuitive responses, recognition of danger signals, natural balance, or the ability to seek missing nutrients by instinct. All these are still present and in people under the umbrella term 'Developing, or Third, World' they are necessary for survival.

In the general human population most senses appear blunted, particularly those involved in self-preservation. This is well illustrated by the high number of rescues, published annually, both on land and at sea, which suggests that responsibility for personal safety was apparently absent in many instances. People are apparently no longer able to sense danger, seemingly unable to read the signs of the approach of adverse weather from the sky, sense the state of the tide from sea movement, often setting off to climb up

a mountain when mist is apparent, paddle on the edge of a river in spate, take a boat out, let children chase waves to the edge of a sea wall in a storm, swim on an ebb tide with a rip current present, or when the situation is such, due to prevailing conditions, that to embark on such activities is likely to end in disaster.

If you are not tuned in to nature, how can you expect your horse to react naturally in response to your wishes? Not only that, but in a world where 'instant' is the norm it can be hard to understand that becoming a natural horseman in the true sense, cannot be achieved in a weekend or by following instructions on a DVD, it takes years of interaction with the species.

Although horsemanship within the twenty-first century is still practised under natural conditions in remote areas of the world such as Mongolia, Turkestan and the Sahara, the local lifestyle of both people and animals in these areas is foreign to the average Westerner. It would be impossible to adopt the methods of natural horsemanship practised by the nomadic peoples of these regions, they would not fit within the living conditions enjoyed by the average Western horse owner.

The Native Americans were some of the most skillful horsemen in history probably because they viewed members of the animal kingdom as their relations and cultivated empathy between themselves and the animals with whom they shared the land in which they lived. The cowboy eventually replaced the Native Americans as the dominant force in North American horsemanship. Because the lifestyle of the modern cowboy does, to a degree, relate to present day 'civilised' living, there is acceptance of the philosophy of the greatest exponent of the art of natural horsemanship, Monty Roberts.

Monty Roberts was one of the first people to relate to the wild mustang and appreciate methods of horsemanship handed down through centuries of Native American culture. He will readily agree that his methods are not new, but rather an adaptation of the methods used for horse husbandry by the North American Indian after the return of the horse to the continent by the Spanish, following the invasion of Mexico by Cortes in 1520.

Monty is not in the first flush of youth and he is the first to emphasise that it has taken nearly 40 years for his suggestions to be accepted by the traditionalists. Having lived, for a variety of reasons, for a considerable time amongst the wild mustang, he was sharp enough to learn from his experiences and to establish the fact that the horse does not think like man, and that in order to interact with a horse man must respect and appreciate the horse's approach both to living with, and interacting with, other species. If there is another hidden secret to his successes, and it may be that this has not been emphasised sufficiently, or indeed even recognised, it is that the methods he employs when teaching, awaken and hone previously submerged, instinctive behaviour *in his human students*, ensuring improved interaction between handler and horse.

Unfortunately few horse owners wishing to be natural horsemen have the time to live in a situation which allows continuous interaction with their animals, and the horse is required to fit in with work, family and social life. This situation can prove difficult for the horse as their inherited instinct is to be part of a family group.

In some handlers mistakes arise from the perception that every horse will automatically respond in a similar manner if exposed to similar methods. This is an incorrect assumption; every horse is an individual and learning to identify the traits of each horse is one of the fascinating features of horsemanship.