

CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND PONY SWIM

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR AMERICAN SPACES

This toolkit is designed to share a unique element of American culture while at the same time developing English language skills of American Spaces audiences.



VIDEOS

- **Small Town Big Deal's Chincoteague Pony Swim*** (19 minutes) - This film provides an entertaining overview of this interesting tradition.
- **Back to the Wild, The Story of Assateague's Wild Horses** (22 minutes) - This National Park Service film helps visitors understand the historic and present-day story of horses on Assateague Island.
- **Pony Auction** (2 minutes)

*American Spaces have been given rights to screen the film.

SUMMARY

Chincoteague Island is located off the U.S. state of Virginia's eastern shore. Every year on the last Wednesday of July, Chincoteague's volunteer firefighters round up the wild ponies that live on nearby Assateague Island and herd them across the narrow channel between the two islands. After the ponies finish the swim, they graze for a short time until they are paraded down Chincoteague's main street to the carnival grounds. On Thursday, the **annual auction** is held to sell the current year's foals to raise money for Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and to ensure that the wild herd on Assateague does not become overpopulated.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of STATE
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

DEFINITIONS

- **Stallion** - an adult male pony or horse
- **Mare** - an adult female pony or horse
- **Foal** - a young pony or horse of either gender
- **Graze** - to allow an animal to feed on grass
- **Pony** - while ponies and horses are the same species, ponies are shorter than horses. Ponies stand no more than 58 inches, or less than one and a half meters tall.
- **Saltwater Cowboys** - The name given to the members of the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department who annually drive the herd of ponies from Assateague to Chincoteague Island.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Show participants watch [Small Town Big Deal's Chincoteague Pony Swim](#) and have them discuss the following questions:

- **Why is the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department's annual pony auction beneficial to the herd of wild ponies that live on nearby Assateague Island?**
- **"Buy-Back" ponies are when somebody purchases a pony and then has the firemen return it to Assateague Island. Why is it good for some of the foals to be taken away while others remain on the Island?**
- **Does this wildlife management increase the health of the herd? Why do you think maintaining wildlife is important?**
- **Would you like to attend the Chincoteague pony swim?**

How did the horses originally get to Assateague Island?

Some people believe the horses arrived on Assateague's shores when a Spanish galleon ship (with a cargo of horses) sank offshore. Others believe the horses arrived when early colonial settlers herded them to the island so they could graze. Both the Maryland and Virginia sides of Assateague have wild ponies, each has a herd of about 160.