



Desert Bighorn Sheep

The Bighorn Sheep, of which the Desert Bighorn is a sub-species, originally came to this country from Asia via the Bering Sea land bridge. The Ice Age glaciers forced the animals as far south as Mexico and when the glaciers receded, the sheep stayed in the mountains and deserts of Mexico and the southwestern U.S.

There was a time when bighorn sheep numbered from 1.5 to 2 million in the western U.S. Trappers and explorers reported seeing bighorn sheep on almost every mountain range. In the mid 1800s, when the settlers trickled steadily westward, the bighorn's numbers began to decline. Disease brought in by domestic animals and hunting were the worst killers. Today, after a century of decline, the number of desert bighorn sheep is increasing, but it hasn't been easy for the wily and vigilant sheep. Even with incredible eyesight, they're powerless against killers they can't see.

As early as 1893, in an attempt to stem the extirpation of bighorns, the Territorial Legislature passed a five year moratorium on the taking of bighorns in Arizona. Additional protection came in the form of a State Game Code in 1913. Enforcement of the regulations was lax, however, and the only sheep that thrived were the ones living in ranges that were too arid or steep for the disease spreading domestic cattle.

In 1937 a survey was conducted to determine exactly why bighorn sheep numbers were declining. Disease, poaching and predators were tagged as major reasons why the sheep weren't making a comeback. As a result of the survey, National Wild Life Refuges were established in Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona. The refuges protected the bighorn sheep habitat, but outside of these areas, numbers continued to decline.

In 1950, John Russo began a systematic five year survey of bighorn populations that included a comprehensive life history study. The increase we've seen in bighorn numbers today is credited to this study.

Wild sheep maintain their home ranges based on knowledge of seasonal feeding and travel routes, passed down from generation to generation. Any disruption of the passage of these traditions can result in suitable habitats being forgotten, and thereby lost to future generations. This could threaten the very existence of some herds. Traditional habitats are critical because bighorns have difficulty in establishing new ranges, and a new range will often be the area where disease from domestic animals is contracted.

Researchers have noticed that bighorn sheep have taken steps to ensure the perpetuation of their own. When a ewe bears a surviving daughter, she will share her range with the daughter, thereby creating competition for her own food. Conversely, in the case of a son, the mother will turn hostile toward him around the age of one year. This drives the son off the secure range, where food might soon be depleted. It will then join with rams to enjoy better food on the less secure ranges.

Because suitable ranges are so critical, a vital goal of wild sheep management is to maintain migratory traditions as much as possible. Numbers indicate the theory is effective.

Washington State made a remarkable recovery effort that resulted in an increase of California Bighorn Sheep from 41 in 1960 to 772 in 1998. Oregon saw an increase from 563 in 1975 to 2,890 in 1998. Nevada saw an increase from 177 in 1985 to 1,248 in 1998. However, any increase is precarious.

Idaho enjoyed a population of 3,850 Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep in 1990. Then a disease outbreak in the winter of '95-'96 decimated their numbers to just 1,700 sheep. Clearly, the sheep need our help to perpetuate their growth.

Several conservation-minded groups and their corps of volunteers have answered the call. These conservation organizations include: The Boone and Crockett Club, The Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, Bighorn Institute, and The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep Society, and the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society. The common goal of most of these organizations is to establish viable, self-sustaining bighorn sheep populations throughout all suitable portions of their historic ranges.

Hopefully, through the work of these organizations and their volunteers, these majestic creatures will flourish once again.