

**Oral presentation by Brian F. Dolan at the Wildlife Water Development Workshop facilitated by the BLM and held at the ASU College of Law on November 3-4, 2004. The oral presentation followed a 10-minute power point presentation entitled " The ADBSS; What We Do and Why" containing 60 photos of projects and sheep using waterholes.**

### **ADBSS Perspectives on Wildlife Water Developments**

**Brian F. Dolan, ADBSS President**

In the mind of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society there is little question that desert bighorn sheep benefit from water holes. We feel that with the fragmented habitats that exist today, the noticeable change in our climate to a more arid state and bighorn numbers being a small fraction of what they once were that man has to do something as mitigation to these negative influences if we are to have desert bighorn sheep in the future. The construction of water holes is one such tool that man can employ to offset the effects of these negative influences and the host of other stresses that sheep face today.

A look at the last hundred years of desert bighorn sheep management in Arizona tells the story.

During the first half of the last century a hands off preservation only management approach was undertaken which resulted in a continuous decline of both sheep numbers and their distribution.

In contrast the last half of the century saw a more progressive management approach that resulted in a significant increase in sheep populations and their distribution.

During the first half of the last century the state of Arizona was a lot less populated. Habitats were less fragmented, sheep could move more freely from one range to another, water tables were not depleted and the climate was less arid. But yet bighorn sheep numbers remain depressed and at risk. They failed to recover from the livestock and market hunting influences brought on by the early settlement of this territory. It is widely understood that desert bighorn sheep used to be plentiful throughout most of Arizona and historical accounts document their presence in nearly all of our mountain ranges including the Peloncillo, Pajarito, Atascosa, Santa Rita, Tucson, Table Top, White Tank and Camelback Mountains. By the 1930's sheep numbers were estimated at only about 1000 animals statewide. But a turnaround was about to happen.

Aldo Leopold wrote in 1935, Jack O'Conner wrote in 1945 and John Russo wrote in 1955 that if we were to have wildlife and sheep in the future an intensive management strategy had to be adopted and implemented. Thus began Arizona's bighorn sheep management program in the last half of the century. The three major elements of this program were 1) implement transplants, 2) build waterholes and 3) administer a sheep hunting program. The first two are obvious but why the third? It is because in this country it has been the sportsman who have always come to the aid of wildlife and provided the bulk of the necessary financial and political support for wildlife conservation activities. With this formula we have seen a dramatic reversal in bighorn numbers; a near seven-fold increase in their aggregate statewide population and an increased distribution throughout at least 42 areas and ranges.

This comeback was not without a price tag. Hunting permit sales don't come close to covering the expense of the state's annual bighorn sheep management program. This past year (2004) the

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sale of 82 permits generated a little more than \$26,000, whereas the total cost of the various bighorn projects and activities proposed for the year amounted to almost \$320,000. These projects include waterholes, surveys, transplants, studies and equipment. As is the case throughout the United States hunters and sportsman provide the primary source for this funding. Over the years the ADBSS has helped raise over \$5.0 million for Arizona's wild bighorn sheep.

I have to argue with those critics that say that hunters only do this so that hunters can kill more sheep. Contrary to some beliefs it not about artificially enhancing wildlife populations for the benefit of sport hunting...its much, much more. It transcends hunting. It's about conservation and realizing that we have a renewable natural resource and a true love for the wildlife. I am a good example of this phenomenon that most non-hunters can't seem to understand. In Arizona you are allowed to harvest one sheep in your lifetime. My opportunity occurred in 1995 in the Cabeza Prieta. It was truly a life changing experience. I came away from that hunt with a renewed commitment to help this imperiled species and have devoted the last decade to that cause. I am not alone. The majority of the current ADBSS Board of Directors and almost 40% of our general membership have also taken their once-in-a-lifetime sheep but yet they continue to volunteer hundreds of hours of their free time towards the program.

It is not easy to explain and I'm certainly not the best person to try. But by close observation of the program and those involved there is a strong indication that it is more than just hunting. There is a significant but often unrecognized element of appreciation for the wildlife. Roosevelt, Leopold, O'Conner and Russo were all correct. Sportsmen do care and if a wildlife program is to succeed you need the type of widespread support and effort that only sportsmen can offer. That's what we do.

I do not object to those that do not understand hunting or this hunter/wildlife conservationist relationship. I do object, however, to those that condemn hunting simply because they do not understand or care to take the time to learn more of the issue and the benefits hunters provide.

What is so wrong with a program that provides benefits to a wide spectrum of the general population, both consumptive and non-consumptive users alike, with little or no expense to tax payers, while at the same time providing the primary revenue source for both game and non-game programs?

We gladly do what we do and do not ask or insist that other non-consumptive users pay their share. The benefits of our programs help all species and are available to everyone. What we ask, however, is an understanding of the program, or at least not an objection to it. Unfortunately, that is currently where our biggest challenge lies.

I refer to it as Preservation vs. Conservation or Wilderness vs. Wildlife. You can pick your term but the challenge is basically the same. The real question is whether we should actively or passively manage our natural resources? It's the reason most of us are here today. The ADBSS obviously supports active management. We firmly believe that taking a hands-off approach to wildlife management simply doesn't work if we are to have sustainable numbers of wildlife for future generations. There isn't a naturally functioning ecosystem anywhere in Arizona that

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allows us this luxury and it does not appear as though we are placing a high enough value on the wildlife resource if we attempt to experiment otherwise.

The philosophical opposition to active wildlife management and water holes in particular has had the effect of crippling most land management agencies almost to the point of being benign. Despite various strategic plans and various agency goals the current blight is preventing any further thought of expanding our wildlife and our sheep populations. The trend today is to simply hang on to what we have and not lose ground on what has been accomplished in the last 40-50 years. That would appear to be extremely short sighted and bordering on the insane given our collective goals and mandates. What is apparent is that a tremendous amount of resources are being expended that do little for the wildlife that we are entrusted to protect and enhance.

Case in point is this wildlife water workshop and those that have been held previously. A level playing field does not appear to exist. Opponents to water can throw something on the wall and despite the gravitational forces of conservation biology and natural resource science, it sticks. Supporters of water, however, have to securely fasten their beliefs to the wall with hundreds of well-documented nails and thousands of dollars worth of thoroughly researched adhesive. We believe the burden of proof has been unfairly placed on the wrong shoulder.

The science is not in doubt as evidenced by the Desert Bighorn Sheep Council's solid support of wildlife water. Public perception, agency policy and a lack of conviction have created this doubt and added fuel to this philosophical debate.

I'm not implying that science and research are bad. Better science is always good and we need to maintain these programs to continuously increase our body of knowledge. But what ever happened to the concept of making decisions with the best information available? It seems as though this has become an archaic practice that has been overtaken by the incessant cry for more science that addresses directly each particular situation. Land managers and biologists are employed to make a decisions...but that has become a very unpopular and almost scary proposition for most administrators. Today the unfortunate trend is a paint-by-the-numbers approach towards land, wildlife and natural resource management. Most decisions today are either delayed indefinitely or wrestled with until it is too late or it becomes a crisis. This practice is not in the best interest of our wildlife resources and I would suggest that we allow the wildlife professionals to do their jobs and to make these decisions without intervention.

I am sorry but our wildlife and especially or desert bighorn sheep deserve better treatment than this. Jeopardizing and putting our wildlife resources at risk does not appear justified. The ADBSS remains committed to the true conservation of our wildlife and the fulfillment of Roosevelt's, Leopold's, O'Conner's and Russo's dream.

Thank You.

Please make sure that all attendees at the workshop today pick up a copy of the ADBSS's 2004 manuscript entitle "*Wildlife Water Developments and Desert Bighorn Sheep in the Southwestern United States*" that are available in the lobby.