

## ***The Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society***

### **Hunters Giving Back to Wildlife**

*By Warren Leek, Past President, Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society*

In the mid-1800s, when Anglo settlers started to arrive here in large numbers, substantial populations of desert bighorn sheep lived in most of Arizona's mountainous regions. As the human population rose, however, bighorn numbers dropped sharply. Diseases introduced by domestic livestock, excessive market and subsistence hunting, and the fouling or denying of traditional water sources due to nearby human activity all contributed to this decline. Shortly after the turn of the century, the bighorn's range had been reduced to the arid southwest portion of the state, the Grand Canyon, and small, isolated herds in a half dozen or so remote locations.

Bighorn sheep were protected in the Arizona Territory as early as 1887, but this protected status didn't lead to an increase in numbers. By 1937 the statewide population outside the Grand Canyon and Lake Mead areas was estimated at no more than 700 animals. Help came in 1939 with the establishment of the KOFA and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife refuges, which set aside 1.5 million acres of southwestern Arizona for desert bighorn sheep and other wildlife. Later, the creation of the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and the Havasu and Imperial National Wildlife refuges further aided the population's recovery.

By 1950, the number of bighorn statewide had grown to an estimated 1,080 animals. In that year, Arizona Game and Fish Department wildlife biologist John Russo initiated a five-year study that became the basis for modern bighorn sheep management in our state. Russo made three recommendations: transplant sheep, develop water catchments, and hunt sheep.

Perhaps Russo's first two recommendations are of obvious benefit. But why the third? How could hunting an animal contribute to its conservation? Fortunately for the state's bighorn sheep, Russo realized that without large amounts of money and hard work, the transplants and water developments would never be accomplished. And he also realized that hunting — or more specifically, hunters — were the key to getting the funds and effort needed to develop an effective sheep management program.

The state's first modern-day bighorn sheep hunt was held in 1953. Twenty permits were issued. The interest sparked by that modest beginning eventually led to the founding of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society in 1967. The founders were a group of concerned hunters whose desire was to help implement Russo's findings and thereby achieve a significant increase in the state's bighorn sheep population.

Over the years, the Society has been involved in a wide variety of projects that have benefited sheep, but most of our efforts have been directed toward two areas — waterhole development and sheep transplants. For a variety of reasons, Arizona has

large tracts of otherwise ideal habitat that are unable to support bighorn sheep due to a lack of water. Because of this problem, waterhole development has been an area of special emphasis for the Society. In cooperation with the Department and various land use agencies, we have participated in 221 water development projects, of which 145 were new catchments and 76 were redevelopments. The Society has provided funds for a large number of these projects, and volunteers from the Society have provided the bulk of the physical labor.

Every year we participate in a half dozen or so waterhole development projects. Typically, 60 to 80 members drive out on Friday evening, camp a mile or two from the project site, work all day Saturday and part of the day Sunday, and then head home Sunday afternoon. The Department's development crew, and a few Society members who are able to get away from work for a while longer than the rest of us, gets the project started before our arrival and also take care of finishing touches after we leave. There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment that comes from knowing we've helped create a permanent water source for a magnificent animal that probably wouldn't be able to make it otherwise. Adding to that sense of accomplishment is the fact that the water will help out a wide variety of other wildlife, both game and nongame.

Prior to the arrival of settlers in Arizona, bighorn sheep could freely roam between the mountain ranges that supported them. Now, however, the deserts which separate those mountains have roads, canals, agricultural fields, and other cultural features that prevent migration. As a result, bighorn sheep are unable, in most cases, to naturally repopulate mountain ranges from which they have become extirpated.

For this reason, the Society has aggressively supported the bighorn sheep transplant programs of the Department, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. To date, 1,379 sheep have been successfully transplanted at various locations in the state. The releases have established viable populations in 10 mountain ranges that had no bighorn sheep prior to the transplants, and they have supplemented remnant populations in many other locations, restoring vitality to those herds and allowing them to expand both their ranges and their numbers.

Every fall the Society conducts a half-day clinic for the fortunate few who were able to beat the odds and draw that coveted once-in-a-lifetime desert bighorn sheep tag. In addition to providing hunters with information about how to prepare for and conduct their hunt, instructors go into detail about how to judge rams for quality and age. By emphasizing the taking of older rams, we not only help hunters to increase the enjoyment and satisfaction they receive from the hunt, but we also help to ensure that a large number of the rams taken each fall are the ones that have passed their breeding peak and no longer contribute to the vitality of the herd.

The average waterhole costs about \$35,000 to \$40,000 to construct, while the cost of a typical sheep transplant comes to about \$1,000 per animal moved. Obviously, the hundred or so sheep tags the Department issues each year don't come close to

generating the funds needed to pay for enough waterholes and transplants to build a successful bighorn sheep management program.

To help finance such a program, the Society conducts a number of fund-raising activities. Each spring, we have a fund-raising banquet at which high quality hunting and fishing trips are auctioned, along with original artwork, prints, firearms, camping equipment, and a number of similar items. In addition, we conduct a raffle for a special Arizona desert bighorn sheep tag, and we auction another through our national affiliate, the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep. The Department furnishes both tags, and all proceeds go back to the Department for its sheep management program.

What has the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society achieved with its efforts to date? For starters, the Society has raised more than \$5 million for the management of bighorn sheep in Arizona. That money has helped to fund over 200 waterhole projects, 79 sheep transplants, and a variety of other projects in direct support of bighorn sheep management in the state. It has also helped to establish healthy desert bighorn sheep herds in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, and it has benefited the sheep management program of the state of Sonora, Mexico.

In 1967, when the Society was formed, there were an estimated 1,200 sheep in the state. Today, that number has grown to about 6,500 animals, and healthy, self-sustaining populations have been established in 10 mountain ranges that had no sheep at all in 1967.

John Russo was right. He knew that hunters had a love of the animal and a desire to give something back, in the form of work, money, or both, to the wildlife that have brought them so much pleasure and satisfaction over the years. The pressures on wildlife will only grow as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but because of the efforts of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society and other like-minded hunter organizations, bighorn sheep and other wildlife species will have a fighting chance to hang on and even thrive in the face of a rapidly expanding human population.

NOTE: Figures in this article were last updated on May 28, 2002.