

Bighorn Sheep Management Plan

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The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) has released its interim Utah Bighorn Sheep Statewide Management Plan (see THE LYNX, 12/98, for Part One of a discussion of the plan and HUPC's detailed Uintas Bighorn Sheep Strategic Plan). The UDWR plan will be finalized though 2005 after it obtains the rubber stamp from the Regional Advisory Councils and Utah Wildlife Board.

While it is important to have a plan, much of this one reveals the bias of UDWR, making the plan more of a hunting strategy rather than a bighorn management plan. From the outset UDWR has recognized only one external interested party, the Foundation of North American Wild Sheep. FNAWS is an important organization with big pockets donating money and effort to western wildlife agencies for the primary purpose of amplifying hunting opportunities by enhancing bighorn sheep populations. Yet many organizations are actually deeply involved in bighorn sheep concerns by their work on habitat and land management issues. For example, the Utah Wilderness Association (UWA) played a major role in securing bighorn habitat and assuring that habitat was protected for bighorns in the Book Cliffs. UWA also played a principal role in the bighorn relocation on Hoop Lake on the North Slope of the Uintas. HUPC's interests have always converged with FNAWS and UDWR on the concept of bringing bighorns back to Utah in a systematic manner while diverging on whether the effort is one of inherent value or primarily to provide additional recreational hunting opportunities.

The plan focuses on predation issues, once again citing concerns that mountain lions threaten bighorn sheep populations. The issue is much more complex than suggested by UDWR. Significant to this discussion should be concerns over transplant protocol, the problems of genetic isolation and inferior and fragmented habitats.

It simply looks like hunting more mountain lions, in the name of bighorn sheep, is once again coughed up as an excuse. The plan sets forth a direction that is counter to the millennia of bighorn and cougar relationships.

While habitat is undeniably the crucial issue, we find it typical and ironic that UDWR cites human disturbance to bighorns as a major problem in the form of off-road vehicle use, mountain biking, river running, and others. We heartily agree. But the depth of UDWR's myopia is obvious--they don't include hunting, a recreational activity that, in many instances, uses ORVs and is every bit as disturbing to bighorn as the other concerns noted! In all the obvious ways, hunting is far more disturbing to bighorns than river running.

The plan also suggests natural plant succession can dramatically affect bighorn habitat. It may change it. It may result in population cycles that are detrimental to outdoor recreation hunting strategies. But natural changes are integral and inherent in the ecological and evolutionary bighorn story. The allegation is an oxymoron!

Vegetation treatments and fire management in the context of bighorn habitat become single species management approaches and may have significant effects on other portions of a much more important and larger landscape. We do agree, nonetheless, that because habitat in many places has been so fragmented that some management activities must be initiated to maintain bighorns, but only

where those activities are not disruptive to the broad system in which bighorn is but one component. If we've learned one thing about bighorn it is that the model of game farming used for so long by UDWR won't work. It seems the more we try to force bighorn into that model, the more frustration we encounter with respect to successful bighorn management plans.

The Wilderness and National Park Management section (on page six) is an anathema. The plan notes in the opening pages that bighorn are almost always considered a wilderness dependent species because they need, first and foremost, isolated, large, remote, inaccessible wild places to survive but then asserts wilderness and parks may prevent more intrusive management! Vegetation treatments, access issues, and water troughs are all largely unnecessary--for millennia bighorn have survived without and, in many places, will do so again with a commitment to manage bighorn within an ecological framework, not a recreational hunting/ game farming framework. The best possible scenario for bighorn would be large, connected, wild wildernesses, even if it means fewer hunter days and lower hunter success!

Competition from other wildlife is noted as a potential problem. Ironically, the literature notes primary competition with bighorns is from domestic sheep which is hardly discussed in this plan because UDWR and FNAWS have decided to transplant and manage bighorns only in areas where domestic sheep are not present. This, of course, is the right thing to do except, in this case, the most impressive Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (RMB) habitat in Utah, the High Uintas, is also occupied by domestic sheep.

Yet the plan is largely silent on this remarkable resource because of the presence of sheep on about half of the nearly 800,000 acres of roadless lands. If this was a strategic statewide bighorn management plan the most valuable habitat would be analyzed and identified, issues raised, solutions discussed. Of course, sheep grazing on the Uintas is controversial. But if bighorn are ever to find their niche in Utah, the Uintas are the place and UDWR must join forces with organizations like ours to mutually, collectively and through consensus work with the Forest Service and domestic sheep operators to find answers and solutions to these issues. By not engaging those issues UDWR appears to be overlooking the most important historical habitat.

And this unfortunately raises the serious and threatening question of UDWR's preference to place non-indigenous mountain goats in the Uintas rather than native bighorn sheep. This points the finger squarely at the paradigm driving UDWR--recreational hunting rather than an ecological/science based management. It is an embarrassment for UDWR and is counter to common sense.

But it does tell us plainly what motivates UDWR--use and demand. This management plan is driven by a recreational hunting strategy to produce licenses and revenue by way of increasing and enhancing hunting opportunities. But, in the end, if bighorn sheep are to survive the tumbling future facing them, this paradigm must change. Rather than seeking to prevent habitat fragmentation and allowing bighorn sheep to inhabit the most wild regions of Utah, this plan focuses on increasing hunting opportunities (by 50%!) and speaks continuously to taming those wild regions with all sorts of anthropogenic intrusions. It speaks not to the ecological fragility of bighorn sheep, but to their value as big game

species with high hunter interest.

It speaks not to the evolutionary dance of bighorns, but to killing mountain lions to assure survival of bighorns to meet the increased hunting opportunities. It speaks to a magic number of 125 bighorn sheep as a viable population per transplant area and then proposes to dump them literally in tiny, fragmented mountainous areas, while tempering any long term view of the one mountain range in Utah, the Uintas, that can and has clearly sustained large bighorn populations, to avoid controversy with domestic sheep grazing. Yet with great vigor UDWR, without a meaningful statewide plan, dumped non-indigenous mountain goats into the Uintas despite obvious ecological concerns.

So much potential, so little movement!

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