

BIGHORN SHEEP – DIE-OFFS- AND RESTRICTED WINTERRANGE

A good many people believe that 80 to 90 percent of the bighorn sheep living on the Ruby Mountains died during the winter of 2009 and 2010. Dead and dying sheep were found all the way from Overland Canyon to Welcome, with the greatest number being found near the Dry Hills south of Wells.

This is not the first time that the bighorn die-off has occurred. Early records indicate a die-off occurred on the Wind River Range of Wyoming in 1895. That same year, 43 carcasses were counted on a hillside adjacent to present day Red Lodge Montana. Over the years die-offs have occurred again and again in Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and even Canada. Most believe the die-offs are caused by the transfer of disease from domestic sheep, while others believe the cause is stress related.

No one ever seems to say much about the effects that predators may have on bighorn. Certainly, if predators can keep other game down, why wouldn't they effect bighorn sheep as well? Predators can be a problem in several ways. Not only do they kill and eat game animals, often they will cause stress as well. If what I have read and observed is correct, bighorn are generally found in rough and rocky terrain. Apparently, when predators are sighted, bighorn's sole means of protecting themselves is by bounding from rock to rock or from ledge to ledge in rough terrain. This is all fine of course, unless a situation arises whereby the feed that might be available to the bighorn in such an area is grazed off and is in short supply.

Think about it. If bighorn are forced out of the high country during winter, where do they go? First, they need an area where there is a good deal of ideal escape habitat – away from the now belt – with a good many south facing or windblown slopes – where the snow melts off from time to time.

There's not always a great amount of these kinds of areas available. Even during mild winters, ideal winter range for bighorn can be limited. So what happens then when predators become numerous? Coyotes, lions, bobcats, eagles are like every other animal. They need to eat every day – day in and day out. And when they find a place where game is found they stay close at hand – returning from time to time to those areas where they know that sooner or later one animal or another will make a mistake and stray a little too far from their escape habitat – and when they do – wham, one predator or another will get them.

On the other hand, think of the benefit there is when predators are held in check. Rather than feeding out a hundred or two hundred feet from escape habitat, bighorn are then free to feed out a hundred yards or more without worry of being caught and killed by predators.

One of the more important studies ever done regarding bighorn sheep, was a study that was completed by Fred L. Jones regarding the statues of bighorn on the Sierras back in 1948. Apparently, there was a good many bighorn in the Sierras at that time. There were not as many as many wanted I suppose, but it was indicated conduction the study would often sight 10 or 15 in one area or another. All and all, I

believe those involved in the study estimated that there were about 350 to 400 animals running on the southern portion of the range at that time.

What interested me the most however, was the stated goals of those involved in the study. It was obvious they wanted to see hundreds and hundreds more bighorn scattered throughout the area. Yet Jones himself stated on page 58, 60, 61, and 62, that forage plants at high elevations where the bighorn were summering were so heavily used by the bighorn that in many places the plants were being pawed from the ground and the crowns and roots of the plants were being eaten – and that small rocks were commonly ingested along with the roots of the plants. To me, such conditions would indicate that there were too many bighorn in the area already. But, that was not the way that Jones and his colleagues were viewing the situation. They wanted more bighorn sheep scattered throughout the area.

It makes we wonder at times, what drives these people, that they go on year after year, decade after decade, pursuing agendas that make no sense scientifically. Take predator control as an example. I know within the various agencies there are people that express a view that they are all for predator control. Apparently, it's all for show however, because, behind the scenes they do everything they can to stop every predatory control practice that is proposed.

Quite frankly, this was the problem that our former governor was faced with. A certain party was telling his boss (the Governor) one thing, while behind the scenes he was doing another. Nothing new of course, but I just think it's important, in face of the great amount of disinformation that has been going around recently, that another side of the story is told.