



Bighorn Sheep



Desert bighorn sheep roam some of the most inhospitable land in canyon country. Their diet consists of the same spiny shrubs that scrape the shins of hikers. Once feared to be nearing extinction, the desert bighorn is making a tentative comeback in southeast Utah due to reintroduction efforts by the National Park Service. With one of the few remaining native herds, Canyonlands has been a vital source of animals for this program.

A Story of Survival

Accounts from early explorers indicate that more than two million desert bighorn once roamed the southwest. By the late 1800s however, bighorn sheep had disappeared or declined in many areas. Extremely vulnerable to diseases from livestock, herd after herd of wild sheep were decimated by pathogens like scabies (an ear mite) and anthrax (a bacterial disease) introduced by domestic sheep. Bighorns were also killed by early explorers, settlers and trophy hunters. Increased competition with domesticated cattle and sheep for food didn't help the situation. In 1975, Utah's population numbered around 1,000 sheep.

When Canyonlands was established in 1964, there were approximately 100 bighorn sheep remaining in the park. To protect these animals, grazing allotments within the park were phased out during the 1970s. The Bureau of Land Management, whose lands border the park, limited grazing leases to cattle only, which lessened the risk of exposure to disease from domestic sheep – probably the most important step in preserving bighorn populations.

In the early 1980s, biologists began relocating sheep from the growing population in Canyonlands in order to establish new herds. Since sheep are poor

dispersers, this is the only way to return them to their historic ranges. To accomplish this, sheep are captured in nets fired from helicopters, their health and age assessed, and suitable animals are transported by ground to a relocation area.

Since the program began, sheep have been reestablished in Arches National Park, Capitol Reef National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Sheep relocated to the San Rafael Swell west of Canyonlands have created two herds totaling more than 600 animals. Today, the bighorn population in Utah is estimated at 3,000 animals. There are roughly 350 sheep in Canyonlands, with separate herds in each of the districts.

Though restoration efforts appear to be working, increased human activity and development continue to threaten the desert bighorn sheep. For the remaining herds to survive, intensive management and conservation measures may be necessary. The protection of undeveloped land and wilderness areas is key to the species' survival. Canyonlands will continue to play a large role in this effort.

If you see a bighorn sheep, please complete the form on the other side of this page.

Bighorn Sheep Observation Form

By recording your observations on this form, you'll be helping scientists study the effects of human-bighorn interactions on range utilization and travel routes.

Your Name: _____ Phone: _____ Park or Area: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____ Your location (be specific): _____

Location of Bighorn: _____

Details of terrain on which bighorn were sighted:

- Rocky slope (lower, middle or upper?)
 Cliff base River edge

Approximate distance to the animal(s): _____

Number of sheep (please estimate age using diagram at the bottom of the page):

Number of Ewes: _____ Ages: _____

Number of Rams: _____ Ages: _____

Unknown Sex: _____ Of these, _____ were lambs

Total number in this observation: _____

Were you (and your group):

- In a vehicle On a motorcycle
 Walking On a mountain bike
 In camp In a boat
 Other

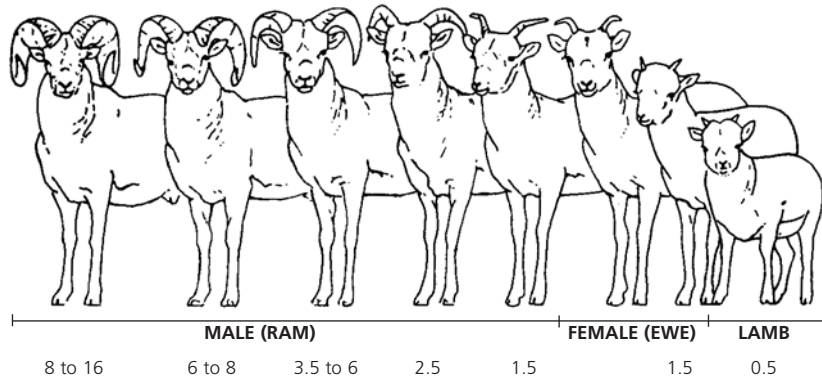
What was the reaction of the bighorn to your presence?

- None Continued lying down
 Walked away Continued feeding
 Ran away Watched you
 Noted your presence then resumed activity (please describe below)
 Other _____

Please note any ailments you noticed:

- Coughing Loose Hair
 Nasal Discharge Lethargic
 Other _____

Other Information: _____



Completed Forms

Please leave completed forms at a visitor center, or mail to:

Chief
 Division of Resource Management
 2282 SW Resource Blvd.
 Moab, UT 84532