

ARTIFICIALITY IN MOUNTAIN SHEEP MANAGEMENT

by

Ray Demarchi

"The value of a recreational experience is inversely proportional to the artificiality of its origin." Aldo Leopold.

Although Leopold was speaking about "put and take" fisheries his quotation is applicable to the mountain sheep resource.

Before I go any further, I will give you my idea of artificiality. Man creates artificiality. At the extreme, an artificial resource (i.e. a wildlife population) is one which would disappear in the absence of the effort of man. The opposite is a natural or wild, self sustaining resource.

It appears and unfortunately so, that something that is never known is seldom missed. In our quest for an increased Gross National Product and a higher standard of living, people come to accept lower quality or deteriorated environments.

Mountain sheep are very much a part of a quality environment throughout the mountainous western states and provinces. In fact, the loss of mountain sheep throughout much of its former range evidences deteriorated and deteriorating environment.

We, as ecological generalists and mountain sheep specialists have a responsibility to protect the wild sheep of North America. We must establish our objectives and develop a conceptual framework which will ensure the protection of our wild mountain sheep.

Over the past two days we have heard a diversity of presentations varying from parasitological and immunological studies through tagging and marking and population dynamic studies to habitat research and manipulation. At both ends of this list lies the potential imposition of artificiality.

The animal researchers are leading us toward the goals of being able to monitor and control diseases through a veterinarian approach while the habitat manipulators would improve nutrition and thus increase survival through an agricultural approach. Off to one side we have those who do their

"biologist thing" by catching the sheep-critters and mutilating them through branding, marking, painting, spraying and tagging.

We do all of these things in the name of mountain sheep management and mountain sheep research. Personally, I think most, if not all of the research being conducted will lead us ultimately to a better understanding of how we can best protect and perpetuate and perhaps even restore the mountain sheep resource.

I would suggest, however, that we begin to question and to discuss in greater depth the values of highly artificial and closely managed sheep populations as opposed to those populations that are truly wild.

At this stage of our technological expertise we could raise bighorn in barns for "put and take" management if we chose to do so. However, I am certain that none of us would promote this approach.

In most areas, except those very few areas which are as yet not influenced by man and are inviolate to such influences, the option of leaving "hands-off" have been taken away. It is obvious, then, that some managerial interference is necessary.

My suggestion is that when we are making decision or promoting our management programs that we apply only the minimum amount of artificiality that will insure the protection and perpetuation of the population. Only in this way will we maintain the highest quality recreational values possible from our wild mountain sheep.