

COMMENTS ON HUNTING

By
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I'm out of my element up here with all these learned biologists who can quote all these figures. I'm just a simple, barefoot, unwashed sheep hunter. If I've done some writing about it, it's because a guy's got to make a buck. However, I've possibly been hunting sheep longer than most of you people here. I've been hunting sheep for just 40 years. I started out in Sonora and I've hunted bighorn in Alberta and British Columbia. I've hunted Dalls many times in the Yukon - stones many times in the Yukon. I've shot one barbary sheep and I've shot maybe a dozen ural in Iran, a couple of red sheep and other sheep. Other people have hunted more sheep and gotten bigger heads than I have. I've been very interested and I liked Bill Wishart's talk very much. I always learn something from the biologists, and unlike a great number of sportsmen, I've got great respect for biologists because they are not all inspired by God and they all aren't the wisest guys in the world. They are human beings like everyone else. But on the whole, they're more apt to be right than the ordinary sportsman.

I've been credited with being a gung ho head hunter - actually I haven't been. I've always tried to get mature rams, and I think if you only shoot the relatively large rams that God will be kind to you sooner or later and you'll get an exceptional one.

I'll have to tell you a story - my wife shot a couple of North American sheep and the first sheep she got was 44 and 44-1/4 and almost 15 inches at the base. It was a Dall and she almost froze to death that day and got pretty sour on sheep hunting. With that ram she won second place in Boone and Crockett that year. The second sheep - the last North American sheep she got was a stone. It was 37-1/2. She had killed one sheep, so when she got up to her stone she looked at it with vast disgust. She turned to me and said, "For heavens sake, why didn't you tell me it was just a little one?"

Bill mentioned the bighorn in the exhibit at the habitat group in the American Museum of Natural History. The story I heard about that was that it was shot in Jasper Park. Is that correct? It was shot in Jasper Park by a guy named James Simpson and he told the park officials there was a very exceptional ram and it should be shot and preserved - he didn't want it to go out and die. He was an outfitter. So he kept bugging those people, but they wouldn't let him shoot the ram and they wouldn't take it themselves, so finally the ram disappeared and they suspected Simpson. I understand that for 3 years they searched his car every time he came into the park and left. He had ditched the sheep with its head in a spruce tree. He brought the horns and skull out and sold it to a head collector who was not a hunter called Dr. Beck from Philadelphia. Dr. Beck put another scalp on it and when he died he left it to the American Museum of Natural History and they put a third scalp on it, and it's on exhibition.

I have been terribly disgusted by the crookedness and the lying and the cheating that has gone on in this record head business. Jim Morgan, in an

article he wrote, blamed me for that. I'm not the boy because I haven't encouraged that sort of thing at all - in fact, it disgusts me.

One friend of mine, a well known sheep hunter and very rich man has a couple of big stone sheep heads in the record book. He told me a very circumstantial account of how he got each of them. I'm a natural born patsy - you know a 5-year old child can con me and everything else. So I believed the guy. I happened to hunt up there with the same outfitter, so I said to my guide, who was also the guide for this guy, "Where was it that so-and-so got these big stones?" He was sitting on a pack with a drink in his hand and he fell off backwards, screaming with laughter. He had bought one from an Indian who had found it in a rock or snow slide and the other he bought from an outfitter up there. I know another record head that was taken off the wall at a beer joint on the Alaska highway. This is not new.

I was going through an old copy of Outdoor Life some years ago and in it I saw a guy named Sheard who lived in Portland, Oregon, and he had a claim in there for the world's record bighorn ram. Anybody who knew anything could tell that his world record bighorn ram was some kind of an argali with a bighorn scalp on it. Their horns are entirely different.

And some of these head hunters! I know one guy who was what I call an instant sheep hunter - a man who made a lot of scratch after the war and decided he was going to be one of the world's great hunters. He was a little guy, he couldn't hit golf balls and he couldn't play tennis and he was so homely that even with all his dough the women didn't dig him. He was looking for appreciation, so he became the world's greatest sheep hunter and he is alleged to have taken all varieties of North American sheep in 30 days. I heard he was in Alaska and he jumped the season and shot 7 Dall rams before he got one which would go in the record book. But I get weary with all this stuff. I say that any mature ram is a good trophy, and particularly with bighorn or desert sheep, any mature ram is a good trophy whether it goes 34 or 44. I refuse to go back east and help them measure heads.

I'm doubtful, but I think Jim Morgan is kind of lining up with the little old ladies in tennis shoes, and I'm sorry to see this, but I've got great respect for Jim as a biologist. However, I think Jim is researching some of his conclusions with his heart.

I was talking to a very dedicated clambake over in Memphis. They had spent a lot of time and a lot of money trying to do something about the California bighorns. They told me there were about 3,000 desert bighorns in California, and of course they haven't had a season on desert bighorns there for at least 70 years and also the little old ladies who protected them are also protecting the burros and the wild burros are taking over the water and the feed.

Years ago, I grew up in Arizona, and the season on desert sheep there was closed about the time I was born. I batted around in the hills and I knew that along in the 30's the sheep were being heavily poached by the prospectors. They all had 30-30's and they had the romantic idea they would live off the country, so they were shooting hell out of the sheep. I went down to the Game Commission one time and I said, "They're poaching the sheep, the sportsmen of the state are not getting the recreation, they're not getting any trophies,

the game department isn't getting revenue, the sheep are declining, so why not institute a study first to find out how many sheep are there and second to study the feasibility of an open season, as I think it's far better to take some of these old rams than to just let them be poached or die of old age." There was a reporter there and the next day you would have thought I had recommended ravishing a Red Cross nurse on the main street in Phoenix - by that time the sheep had become sacred.

I'll have to tell you something funny that happened after that - one of the first guys they hired was a very interesting guy named Felipe Wells - he is still alive - he was a cousin of Sumner Wells the Secretary of State. He had grown up in Mexico, he spoke perfect Spanish, he had gone to an exclusive school in the east and his family had quite a bit of money. He was hired to study sheep so he had a little camp way back up in the Catalinas. His supervisor decided to go up and see how he was doing, as he hadn't heard from him in some time. He got on a mule and went on down the trail and up there was Felipe with a nice fat ram hung up in a tree and he was toasting sheep ribs over the fire.

The first man who made a study that amounted to anything on desert sheep in Arizona was a friend of mine named Nichols - he's dead - and then I know Johnny Russo who studied bighorns. Since then there's been a lot of fine big-horn rams taken in Arizona and the sheep they say are slowly declining, but it's because of the invasion of the habitat and not because some of the rams have been taken out.

I think, in the first place, that the sheep is a trophy animal. I think when you've got the meat hunter, the casual meat hunter, that this is the end and I think that some of that has happened up in Alaska.

I hunted up around the Big Smoky in 1943. The greatest game country I ever saw in my life. I saw about 75 mature rams, about 300 ewes, lambs and small rams, I saw 33 grizzlies in 30 days, we saw hundreds of caribou, we saw maybe 20 bull moose and then I went there 18-19 years later, took my wife and daughter up there, and boy that country had had it as you well know. There were outfits all over. There were still a few rams, but the caribou were shot off. I heard a rumor of a big grizzly that had been killed by some outfit and I saw the big grizzly hide - it was about 4 foot long.

There were thousands of goats when I was up there in '43 - literally thousands of them - one camp we had we could look out from and there would be goats all over the hillside - 30-100 goats, and when I was up there the second time there weren't any goats. I mean instead of thousands we might have seen a hundred - I'd like to ask - just what happened to the goats?

But anyway, there were a lot of very casual hunters coming in there. They would go to Grand Cache, I think it was, and rent some Indian horses and then ride in there and shoot all kinds of things. I was visiting an Alberta rancher one time and I saw some horns nailed up on his barn. I didn't know what they were, so I said, "What the hell are those things?" He said, "They're bighorn heads." There wasn't one over 3 years old and most about 2 and those guys went in there hunting every year. I don't think it should be allowed. I think sheep should be kept as a trophy animal.

I have just finished a book on sheep hunting and I borrowed very heavily from various biologists. I haven't finished the last chapter, but I'm going to call it "The Future of Sheep Hunting" and I frankly don't know what it is. I think it sounds pretty good in Alaska, I'm scared about northern British Columbia, I think there is too much development going on there. I think I'm very gloomy about the situation in the U. S. In Oregon I think it was, I think they gave 14 sheep licenses and they had about 5,000 applicants for them. Well, that becomes simply ridiculous and the same thing in Washington. I'll tell you there are so many people hunting sheep just so they can say they shot a ram or just because they want some kind of a head to hang on a wall. They have a few California bighorns in Washington, not far from where I live in Idaho, and people apply for and sometimes get a permit to hunt them.

This guy called me up from right across the river in Washington, and said, "Mr. O'Connor, I drew a sheep permit for a California bighorn for the Blue Mountains." He asked me how to hunt sheep, and I said, "Well, you get a fairly flat shooting rifle, a good pair of binoculars, spend your time scouting the country if you can and spend more time looking and walking than anything. When you see a sheep, wait till he's settled down and will stay put for a while and then get as close as you can to him. Take a good, firm rest and then a carefully placed shot, kill him with the first shot."

About 6 weeks later he called me up and said, "Mr. O'Connor, do you remember I called you and told you I got a sheep permit?" I said, "Yes, did you get anything?" He said, "Yes, I got one." "Well, did you take my advice?" "Well, not exactly. I went out and I saw this ram and I got excited, he was about 300 yards away, and I started shooting at him off-hand. He acted as if he were hit so I went over there and I finally found some blood, but I never found the ram. I hunted for him 2-3 days and then I went on and shot at a couple more but I never did hit those. Then I went out to hunt again about 10 days later and some trout fishermen told me there was a wounded ram down by the creek, and by God it was the first one I shot. The poor thing was lying there by the creek and by Jesus did he stink, but he was still alive so I shot him. It was a pretty nice ram."

Well, I'll let you go now. Thanks again for the opportunity to talk to you.