

DALL SHEEP MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA FOLLOWING
CONGRESSIONAL SETTLEMENT OF THE ALASKA LANDS ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

Marketing of Alaskan oil required construction of a pipeline from the oil fields on the North Slope to an ice-free port. Construction of the Alaskan pipeline could not begin until the Native land claims were settled. This settlement also involved conservationists who objected to the pipeline. The resulting compromises settled the Native claims, provided for construction of the oil pipeline, and assured conservation interests that at least 80 million acres would be added to the four Federal conservation systems. This final action required further Congressional action, and a bitter struggle developed between the State of Alaska and the Federal Government over which lands and how much of them would go into national parks and other conservation systems. During this battle, vast national monuments were administratively created to pressure Alaska into acceptance of the Federal package. These monuments were created with extremely restrictive hunting regulations and had dramatic impacts on Dall sheep (*Ovis dalli*) management. Subsequent resolution of the issue by Congress relaxed these restrictions to the point that Alaska can now manage about 75 percent of the Dall sheep in the State. Problems with continued sport hunting on park/preserve lands and decreased hunting opportunity lie ahead. The subsistence use of Dall sheep may have particularly far-reaching impacts under new State and Federal laws.

INTRODUCTION

Development of the substantial oil fields in Alaska and increasing uncertainty about foreign oil availability to the United States have caused a dramatic change in the opportunity to hunt Dall sheep in Alaska. Environmentalists and conservation groups generated considerable resistance to construction of the oil pipeline which bisects Alaska, running south from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. Ironically, the concerns of these environmentally oriented groups have placed Dall sheep in a more precarious position throughout Alaska than they occupied before the battle to protect wildlife and wildlife habitat began.

In order to understand this odd turn of events and clear away the confusion surrounding sheep hunting in Alaska today, we must review some history. Before the pipeline could be built, the unresolved land claims of Alaska Natives had to be settled. Once the importance of Alaskan oil to the United States was recognized, these Native claims were quickly resolved by Congress. Part of this settlement was a compromise in which environmental protection interests accepted the pipeline in exchange for a guarantee that an additional 80 million acres of Alaskan land would be included in Federal park, refuge, wild and scenic river, or forest conservation systems. The first deadline for congressional action on these additions to the Federal conservation systems was the close of the 1978 congressional session. As adjournment drew near, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act passed the House and went to the Senate. When passage by the Senate appeared to be jeopardized by resistance of the Alaskan senatorial delegation, Secretary of the Interior, Cecil Andrus, attempted to force the Alaskan delegation to abandon its resistance to the bill by threatening administrative withdrawals under the Bureau of Land Management's Organic Act and National Antiquities Act. These classifications, he threatened, would be far more restrictive than the proposed congressional actions. The Secretary's tactic was not successful and the Alaska lands bill failed to pass the Senate. This prompted the Secretary to make good his threat, and in December 1978 President Carter, acting on the advice of Interior Secretary Andrus, administratively created 56 million acres of new national monuments in Alaska and classified 49 million acres as wildlife refuges under terms of the BLM Organic Act. As of that date, hunting became illegal on all National Park Service-administered national monuments, and a significant portion (nearly half) of Alaska's Dall sheep resource was off limits to hunters.

These administrative closures of Dall sheep hunting were not well enforced during the hunting season of 1979. During that hunting season, numbers of irate Alaskans and some nonresidents reported hunting and taking at least 150 sheep in the newly designated national park monuments. In December 1980, both houses of Congress passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, relaxing some of the stringent restrictions on hunting Dall sheep. Subsequently, regulations were developed which related to subsistence taking of Dall sheep in the national parks as well as regulations for sport hunting in the national park preserves. Park preserves are areas adjacent to parks which have the habitat protection afforded to parks, but allow recreation hunting. The results of these actions have been confusing to Dall sheep managers and hunters alike.

The purpose of this article is to make the present status of sheep hunting in Alaska as clear as possible and assess the future of sheep hunting.

METHODS

Obviously, a subject such as the one I am discussing here involves methods which beg scientific description. Suffice it to say, power

politics was the method of choice, and strange bedfellows were made by the methods of Shakespeare (1864) and Warner (1870). Population estimates were made from aerial surveys. Harvest data were gathered using mandatory hunter reports.

RESULTS

Important changes which resulted from oil development and all it has occasioned in its wake are discussed below as they relate to Dall sheep management.

Horn Size

The minimum requirement for legal rams was increased from 3/4 curl (27-degrees of a circle) to 7/8 curl (315 degrees of a circle) described by the outside surface of the horn. This effectively raised by 2 years the average age at which rams become legally available for harvest. The Alaska Board of Game adopted this more conservative approach to regulating harvest in response to the distinct possibility that where hunting continued pressure would increase and harvest would quickly remove all larger sheep, an undesirable situation for both sheep populations and hunters.

The decrease in number of sheep harvested under the 7/8-curl regulation was less than anticipated in 1979. The mean harvest of rams in the 2 years preceding the reductions in sport hunting was 1,250. In 1979 the reported harvest was about 1,000 sheep including known subsistence harvests (a decrease of 20%). In 1980, this number declined to about 850, but the 1981 harvest rose again to about 1,000. Average horn size increased somewhat because the 7/8-curl regulation caused a decrease in the number of very small rams harvested. It is still too soon to know with certainty whether this level of harvest is sustainable or whether the relatively high harvest will result in a depletion of ram stocks. Future surveys and horn size trends will answer this question. I suspect the harvest will stabilize between 700 and 1,000 rams per year as horn size approaches the legal minimum. This means eventually most large, trophy sheep will come from special management areas where harvest is held below recruitment levels or regulations mandate trophy horn size.

Permit Restrictions

The Arctic National Wildlife Range (now a wildlife refuge) was placed on restrictive lottery permit status (with 25% of the permits offered to nonresident hunters). This was largely at the insistence of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who perceived an apparent mandate from nonhunting recreationists to reduce hunter use on the Refuge. In the 3 years this permit system has been operational, the total number of permits offered has never been used by the public. This regulation was a conservative reaction to the threat of increased crowding in an area where Alaskans had approved the Alaska Department of Fish and Game management goal of aesthetically

pleasing sheep hunting. Current regulatory changes before the Alaska Board of Game are expected to return to previous sport hunting seasons and bag limits.

Subsistence Hunting

Cooperative alliances between seemingly diverse groups such as anti-hunting preservationists and Native groups (pro-subsistence hunting) resulted in a subsistence hunting title in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Previously, a very similar piece of legislation was passed by the bush-dominated Alaska legislature. The effect of these acts was to define the highest priority use of fish and game resources as subsistence use. At the time the legislation was drafted, there was no generally accepted definition of subsistence, and such a definition is still lacking. The current trend is toward definition by regional proximity to the resource involved. Once implementation of the State subsistence law began and urban resource users realized the potential impact the law had on their activities, a citizens' initiative to repeal the State subsistence law was quickly organized. Enough signatures have been gathered that the issue will be resolved on the November 1982 general election ballot. Recently, the State Attorney General's office informed the Alaska Board of Game that continued procrastination in addressing the subsistence issue, either positively or negatively, will mean that season closures in Alaska will be virtually unenforceable. This would occur because State subsistence legislation prohibits establishment of sport hunting regulations without first assuring that local, subsistence needs have been satisfied. Only if a harvestable surplus exists after these priority demands have been met, can sport hunting be allowed.

This decision has resulted in proposals for consideration by the Alaska Board of Game which may have the following effects on Dall sheep hunting in Alaska. The proposed regulations also establish a lengthy (August 1 to April 30) season with a bag limit of one to three sheep (of either sex) for local residents in much of the Brooks Range. The established 40-day ram season for Alaska residents who live in other parts of the State would continue. Local (subsistence) hunters would also be exempt from most restrictions on methods and means under proposed regulations. That is, subsistence users could take sheep the same day airborne (landing to shoot) and with the aid of snares, artificial salt licks, and radio communications among other things. In the remainder of the Brooks Range, the only area in Alaska where special subsistence regulations for sheep have been proposed sport hunting would continue as it is, but subsistence hunters would have the same long seasons, a bag limit of three sheep, and freedom from constraints on methods and means of taking.

Federal regulations (generally) allow subsistence taking within the new national park "core" areas. Harvest in park preserves is considered sport-taking.

A subsistence sheep hunt was established in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1979. There, hunters may take three sheep after obtaining a registration permit. A quota of 50 sheep per year governs harvest. Preliminary indications are that this management practice is having a detrimental effect on the local sheep populations. Hunter effort has been localized, and the affected populations appear to be declining. Further survey work must establish this as a definite trend before any restrictive actions may be taken. Apparently, the Game Division of Alaska Department of Fish and Game will have to fund, perform, and apply these survey results.

It should be noted that Dall sheep populations in intact ecosystems (those with a natural complement of predators) may lack the inherent ability to produce a harvestable surplus. As a result, sheep populations sustaining subsistence hunting must be monitored to determine if subsistence hunting practices result in population declines. Furthermore, the future may require restrictions on taking sheep because of the subsistence priority law. Should this be necessary, the first step would be an end to sport hunting for rams by non-Alaskans, followed by prohibition of sport hunting for rams by Alaska residents who don't live near the exploited populations. If further restrictions are necessary, local subsistence hunters would probably be restricted to rams only and eventually no hunting would be allowed (even by local residents) until the populations had been reestablished for former abundance.

Sport Hunting

The total number of sheep available for sport hunting in Alaska is about 25 percent less than before the new national parks were created. The degree to which this impacts sport hunting varies with location as the following summaries illustrate.

Brooks Range

The Brooks Range was the most affected of Alaska's mountain ranges. An estimated 8,000 sheep in Gates of the Arctic National Park are now unavailable to sport hunters. With the permit system in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, only about 11,000 of the estimated 25,000 total sheep in the Brooks Range are available to sport hunters without special permits. Anticipated removal of the permit requirement from the eastern section of the Arctic Wildlife Range will add another 6,000 sheep to this total. About 500 of these sheep are found west of the new national park in a park preserve on the lower reaches of the Noatak River, its tributaries, and the DeLong Mountains. Sheep resource inventory in the western Brooks Range has been fragmentary, and population estimates for this area will probably change with further survey efforts. It should be noted that the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has always attempted to make conservative estimates of sheep populations; consequently, it appears likely that further knowledge will increase population estimates.

Tanana Hills-White Mountains

Sheep in the Yukon-Charley National Park Preserve will continue, for the present, to be available to sport hunters. This area is considered to have a high probability of sport hunting restriction in the future because of the relatively high human population and the small, almost relict, sheep populations there. It seems unlikely that local subsistence demand, if satisfied, will leave any sheep for sport hunters. The remainder of sheep in this area are mainly distributed in the Yukon Flats Wildlife Refuge. There is no present indication these sheep will become less available to sport hunters.

Alaska Range

A small number (probably near 200) of sheep in the Mt. McKinley (now called Denali) National Park extension will be lost to sport hunters. From National Park Service surveys in the newly created Lake Clark National Park, I estimate 1,000 sheep formerly available to sport hunters will now be off limits. Historically, harvest in the Lake Clark area has been light, so this loss is really a loss of opportunity to hunt more than a restriction of sheep hunted.

Wrangell Mountains

Intense pressure for continued Dall sheep hunting in the Wrangell Mountains was successfully maintained throughout the legislative process. As a result, up to 85 percent of the Wrangell Mountains sheep are available for sport hunting in the park preserve, and subsistence take (of legal rams) is allowed in the core parks. In this mountain range, the great loss to sheep and sheep hunters is the area near the Canadian border on the upper Chitina River in the southeast corner of the mountain range. The number of sheep lost to hunting in this area is not large, but their importance must not be overlooked. This area, kept in the park rather than shifted to park preserve status, is known to produce the largest Dall rams in Alaska--and perhaps the world. It remains in the park as a result of preservationist influences to keep a portion of un hunted Dall sheep habitat in Alaska adjacent to Kluane Park on the Canadian side of the border.

In addition to this loss of sheep hunting opportunity in Alaska, there is also the potential loss of hunter interest and, ironically, subsequent loss of the protective mantle such interest places over favored species like Dall sheep. There has been a decrease in the number of sheep hunters reporting since the initial creation of the national monuments in 1978. In the 3 years prior to the monument designations, the number of sheep hunters reporting averaged 3,032. For the 3 years since monuments (and eventually new parks) were created, the number of sheep hunter reporting has been 2,284. Other factors, notably economic recession, may be responsible for this decrease. Still, these losses produce a regrettable--and unnecessary--displacement of one segment of the sheep-interested public. Interest in public hunting must be kept at a high level if sheep are to

fare well in Alaska amid potentially conflicting activities such as mineral extraction and agricultural development. Sport hunters are the only reliable source of revenue and support for continued land use practices which ensure the integrity of mountain sheep habitat.

The future character of recreational sheep hunting in Alaska is still uncertain. Considerable negotiations will be required to assure that sport hunting continues in park preserves. The impact of subsistence regulations both in parks and other Federal lands will be uncertain particularly if the citizens' initiative to repeal the State subsistence law succeeds. Fortunately, sheep hunters, hunting organizations, and associations of biologists (such as the Northern Wild Sheep and Goat Council) are advocating biologically sound management of hunting in northern parks.

Sheep hunters and hunting-oriented conservation groups such as the National Rifle Association, Safari Club International, and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep were indispensable stalwarts in the fight to save sport hunting of sheep in Alaska. Although the battle was not a total success, there is still hope that a substantial interest in Dall sheep by the hunting public can be maintained and even increased by those willing to put energy and money into holding the line and expanding the opportunity for future hunters to seek Dall sheep in Alaska.

LITERATURE CITED

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CONFERENCE DISCUSSION

Q. How many people qualify for subsistence hunting?

Ans. The way it is currently defined, only those people living in direct contact with the resource they choose to utilize. Federal law also has criteria in which "customary and traditional dependence" are considered. Rulings on what is customary and traditional will be made in court if it should ever come to that. An additional criterion, should there ever be a sufficient scarcity of any given subsistence resource, is one of scarcity of alternate resources.

Q. Wayne, you have a Division of Subsistence in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Does subsistence hunting contribute any economic support for activities of this division?

Ans. No, the Subsistence Division is completely funded by appropriations from the general fund by the legislature. Currently, the "bush" dominates the legislature because of the apportioning of seats in the legislature. The Subsistence Division has had no money problems so far.

Q. Have you considered alternatives to subsistence hunting? Can you buy meat for the Natives? Is it possible to supplement their diet with beef?

Ans. The Natives are not interested in this approach. Some have said they cannot live if they don't have wild game to eat. Also, one component of the subsistence lifestyle, as it has come to be defined, demands continuance of historic or customary and traditional things. Sociologists tell us that disruption of these things in a cultural transition period leads to alcoholism and other forms of socially deviant behavior. Alaska Native culture is clearly in transition, and we are all "walking on eggs" in an effort to keep social problems to a minimum. (Of course, the legal complications surrounding subsistence have clearly disrupted my lifestyle relevant to sheep research and management, so you may anticipate socially deviant behavior on my part at any time.)

Q. You said that Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts qualify as Natives in Alaska? What percentage of the population is Native?

Ans. About 15 percent, but the Native population is growing rapidly. Improvements in nutrition and health care have probably contributed somewhat to cultural disruption, but they have also resulted in a rapidly increasing population which seems certain to result in increased subsistence demand.