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WILLIAM C. DUNN - MAN AND WILD SHEEP: WHEN IS IT COEXISTENCE AND WHEN IS IT ENCROACHMENT?

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Abstract: Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep have remained at a carrying capacity of 300-400 animals for 10 years in the Pecos Wilderness of New Mexico, one of the most heavily used wilderness areas in the Southwest. Bighorn are easily approached and often can be hand fed. Conversely, a Rocky Mountain bighorn population in the Sandia Mountains Wilderness near Albuquerque, New Mexico grew to greater than 100 in the 1960's but was extinct by 1990. Increased human disturbance has been implicated in the decline. Although most development did not directly encroach into bighorn habitat, the distance between housing developments and sheep habitat decreased over time. Close proximity to the mountains probably contributed to an increase in recreational use by nearby residents, an increase in feral dogs and a decreased probability of prescribed burning to reverse vegetation encroachment. Bighorns thrive in the Pecos Wilderness despite intense recreational use probably because they are afforded temporal and spatial isolation from humans, something that became increasingly rare for the Sandia bighorn after the 1960's.
