
HUNTING/HARVEST STRATEGIES

CHAIR: KEVIN HURLEY, WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

ROB B. YOUNG - THE USE OF SILENT WITNESS LINES TO DETER WILD SHEEP POACHING

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Abstract: Desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) have high economic value to state wildlife agencies. In Arizona, sale of one bighorn sheep tag raised over \$300,000 for management activities associated with this species. Further, nonconsumptive users place a high intrinsic value on the observing of desert bighorn. Hence, management of this resource is a priority to wildlife agencies. Loss of mature rams to illegal harvest create high concern for both the consumptive and nonconsumptive users which in turn results in loss of public support to wildlife agencies. Silent Witness programs such as Arizona's Operaton Game Thief provide a unique opportunity to apprehend violators. These programs also provide substantial deterrent effects to violators. We will discuss specific cases such as the one in Arizona where an anonymous tip resulted in the arrest and conviction of the violators. In all, rewards paid for this information exceeded \$5,000. Criminal and civil assessments in this case exceeded \$17,000. Several other states have had similar successes with desert bighorn cases.

Bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) emigrated from Eurasia to North America, crossing the Bering land bridge approximately 70,000-100,000 years ago (Kurten and Anderson 1980). They eventually spread to much of the mountainous West, extending as far south as the southern end of Baja California Sur and the northern reaches of the Sierra Madre (Brown 1989). Bighorn were successful colonizers and eventually occupied areas as far east as the Badlands of North and South Dakota, portions of Nebraska, and the Trans-Pecos region of Texas (Buechner 1960).

In Arizona, the journals of early explorers are used to develop an understanding of the pre-settlement distribution. Coues (1867) indicated that desert bighorn had an extensive range that included most of the mountain ranges in Arizona. J.O. Pattie (1833) found numerous bighorn in mountainous regions in proximity to the San Francisco River in eastern Arizona. The early naturalist E.A. Mearns (1907) found bighorn in many mountain ranges including the Peloncillos in southeastern Arizona;

the Pajarito, Atascosa, and Santa Rita mountains in southern Arizona; and in much of the Verde Valley, the Bill Williams Mountains, and the San Francisco Peaks in north-central Arizona. Presently, all bighorn populations from the mountain ranges listed have been extirpated.

This decline in desert bighorn numbers and distribution has lead to formation of several organizations dedicated to assisting state wildlife agencies improve bighorn populations. These organizations have heightened interest in bighorn sheep. Support from these organizations is essential, as maintaining or enhancing desert bighorn sheep populations requires considerable management intervention. Management activities include water development, translocations, and removal of domestic livestock in restoration efforts. In Arizona, most of these efforts are funded in cooperation with sporting groups who raise these funds via auctions or raffles of permits to harvest bighorn.

While not a direct reflection of the value people place on desert bighorn, the highest price paid for an Arizona desert bighorn tag is \$303,000. In the 15 years that these permits have been offered in Arizona, over \$3.0 million has been raised from the auction/raffle of these permits (AGFD unpublished data). Given the rarity of desert bighorn, which makes drawing a legal permit difficult, coupled with the fact that desert bighorn are highly sought after as trophies, it is likely that illegal harvest occurs throughout the range where this species is found.

Like most illegal activities, it is impossible to determine the amount of illegal desert bighorn poaching that occurs. It is important to note, though, that illegal trade in wildlife is a worldwide problem. Currently, the unlawful commercialization of wildlife is second only to drug trafficking as an illegal activity. A recent estimate indicated that up to \$4.0 billion/year is generated through the illegal trade of wildlife or wildlife parts (Clede 1993).

Silent Witness Line Operation: In 1978, the New Mexico Game and Fish Department initiated a program where concerned citizens who had observed wildlife crimes could contact the agency on a toll-free line to report these crimes. Arizona followed the next year with a similar program. Today, all U.S. states and Canadian provinces have a silent witness program for reporting wildlife-related crimes. These programs are known by various names including Report All Poachers (RAP), Turn In Poachers (TIP), or Operation Game Thief (OGT). The Arizona program uses the Operation Game Thief name.

Our program is in operation on a 24-hour a day, 365-day/year basis. We utilize a toll-free line that accesses the AGFD Law Enforcement Dispatch Center. All callers can remain anonymous if they request this. One of the key elements of the success of this program is that rewards are offered for information concerning various violations of Arizona law, including wounding or killing wildlife, illegal possession or transportation of wildlife or wildlife parts, selling wildlife, and in some

cases, for vandalism. Rewards are offered in cases where the information leads to an arrest (including a citation), and does not require a conviction. Rewards vary from \$50-\$1,000 depending on several factors, including the species and number of animals poached and whether the individual is a repeat offender. On occasion, private donations are solicited to increase a reward offered. In 1998, \$14,500 in rewards were paid based upon calls to the OGT line, with \$1,200 paid in desert bighorn related cases.

When a concerned citizen calls the OGT line, the dispatcher receiving the call places a priority on the call, completes a "Report of Violation" form, enters the information into a computer database, and assigns the call to a case officer. Priorities are assigned with regards to several factors, including the type of violation reported and whether the violation is in progress. Our OGT line can be accessed from the states that border Arizona (New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and the southern half of California).

Case Studies: In recent years there have been several instances in Arizona where members of the general public have assisted AGFD in solving crimes related to the illegal take of desert bighorn rams. In these case studies, poaching was detected and a call received through the Operation Game Thief line that initiated law enforcement investigations. In some of these cases, without these calls, the loss of bighorn rams likely would have gone undetected.

Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum: On December 5, 1987, a violator illegally entered the grounds of the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum (ASDM) after normal visitor hours and killed a mature desert bighorn ram that was on exhibit. This ram had been taken from the wild in western Arizona several years earlier. The killing was discovered by one of the caretakers the next morning. The animal had been decapitated and the head removed from the museum. Although AGFD received notification from the ASDM, a call was received from an anonymous caller who reported the crime through the OGT line. The caller re-

ported additional information that aided the investigation of the poaching. This case was eventually solved several months later when a state patrol officer in California stopped a motor home for a traffic violation. In a search of the vehicle, the horns of the poached animal were discovered and charges relating to the poaching were filed. Coincidentally, 3 days after the initial call regarding the poaching at the ASDM, a call was received on the OGT line where a report was made that indicated that an individual was trying to sell a desert bighorn skull that had been poached. Investigations revealed that the incidents were not related and the second poaching was also solved using information provided via the OGT line.

Goat Mountain: One of the highest visibility desert bighorn poaching cases involved the illegal take of a mature ram from the Apache Lake area in central Arizona in 1988. The desert bighorn in this area were the result of a translocation conducted by the AGFD in 1980 and 1981, whereby 32 desert bighorn were released to the area. This translocation was successful, and the population grew in both number of animals and occupied area (Cunningham et al. 1989). The area occupied by desert bighorn was close to 3 lakes used extensively for boating and fishing, and the public frequently observed desert bighorn in the area, resulting in desert bighorn being important as watchable wildlife. Two anglers on Apache Lake observed the carcass of a bighorn ram that had been shot and the head removed. They reported the crime through the OGT line, and an investigation ensued. The crime became highly publicized as both television and newspaper media made extensive coverage of the case throughout Arizona. Concerned citizens contacted the Department through the OGT line and contributed funding to increase the reward offered to a total of \$5,000. It took over 4 years of investigation, and ultimately, good information provided via the OGT line before the case was solved and arrests made. The head of the ram was still in the freezer of 1 of the 2 individuals involved. The primary individual involved was convicted and assessed more than \$17,000 in criminal and civil assessments. The second individual was convicted and assessed a

total of \$7,000 for his involvement in the poaching. Both individuals had their hunting privileges revoked for 5 years.

During its 20 years of operation, the Arizona OGT program has received calls from concerned citizens that resulted in 91 investigations involving illegal activities with bighorn sheep. In 1998 alone, 10 case investigations were initiated based upon OGT calls related to bighorn sheep poaching. One of these cases is still active and involves a suspect who lives in Alaska and supposedly flew to Las Vegas, rented a vehicle, drove to the Lake Mead area and poached a desert bighorn.

Conclusions: Experience suggests that poaching most frequently focuses on the maturest ram available. These are also the animals that hunters and non-consumptive users seek; thus a conflict in uses develops when prime-aged rams are lost to illegal harvest. Further, Geist (1971) reported that adult rams are essential in maintaining important social interactions in wild sheep populations. It is important that wildlife management strategic plans recognize that illegal harvest can be an important mortality source. We believe that law enforcement and use of silent witness lines can play a role in reducing illegal harvest of wild sheep. For this to become a reality though, it is essential that law enforcement and wildlife management personnel work in cooperation to promote use of silent witness wildlife lines such as Arizona's Operation Game Thief.

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QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS - ROB B. YOUNG PRESENTATION

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I have a question about the two suspects in the Apache Lake case. Were their licenses revoked for five years?

ROB YOUNG: Yes, unfortunately, our laws only max at five years. Violators can do one to five. If we have a repeat offender, the price of business goes up.

JIM BAILEY, NEW MEXICO: What about the buyers of poached wildlife? What are the sanctions, and how often are they apprehended?

YOUNG: That's a big unknown. The sanctions are high. That's the biggest part of the \$4 billion cost that I alluded to earlier. The Fish and Wildlife Service needs to do a lot of work on their laws on Lacey Act violations. I'll tell you at the break what the Lacey Act is; I won't take the time now. So many of these violations go unnoticed. We almost have to depend on either infiltration, which is like the big case we showed you with all the multiple animals, which is expensive and time-consuming, or we have to rely on people turning somebody else in. So we think that probably we find out about less than five percent of the violations that occur worldwide.

BAILEY: That case must have involved a lot of buyers? You had a list of 50 or 60 animals.

YOUNG: Yes.

BAILEY: How many of those buyers were apprehended?

YOUNG: Well, only a couple of them were actually sold. One person was apprehended, like I said. That jaguar was sold to the taxidermist. He did a full body mount and sold it to our guys; our Colorado guys in New Mexico.

As you can see, there was multiple state cooperation on that particular case. We didn't find out about most of the animals until after two and a half years. Poachers have big egos, and they love to take pictures. The use of photographs, still photographs and video have been a Godsend to law enforcement, because they convict themselves with those things. That's how we made a lot of them, but we did not know who bought the poached animals. Some of the records we obtained with search warrants helped to identify them. As I recall, there were 17 people that were issued citations for one reason or another on that big case.

GLENN LORTON, NEW MEXICO: Why aren't higher fines levied when auction tags clearly indicate a higher value?

YOUNG: In Arizona we have a five person commission that sets the value of wildlife. Values have to be approved again when they're reset by our legislature. In some states, like in Utah, I don't think they have made anything in ten years off of OGT, but their fines are big-time when they catch poachers. You poach a sheep or a moose up there, and you better bring your checkbook or your toothbrush because you're going to do some time.