Social Life

Rams battle to determine the dominant animal, which then gains possession of the ewes. Facing each other, rams charge head-on from distances of 20 feet or more, crashing their massive horns together with tremendous impact, until one or the other ceases.

Bighorns live in separate ram and ewe bands most of the year. They gather during the breeding season (usually July-October), but breeding may occur anytime in the desert due to suitable climatic conditions. Gestation lasts about 6 months, and the lambs are usually born in late winter.

Disturbances

Bighorn sheep populations dropped rapidly in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Populations declined due to over hunting by settlers and miners. Domesticated animals also competed with bighorns, especially at waterholes.

Activities that influence bighorn sheep numbers include: hunting and other recreational use of habitat, poaching, habitat fragmentation and encroachment caused by roads, fences, mining, military and recreational activities.

Creation of wilderness areas in the California Desert has had a positive impact on bighorn population and in some instances populations have rebounded. Relocated animals from these herds have been used to repopulate ranges and infuse weakened herds bloodlines.

Characteristics

Desert bighorn are stocky, heavy-bodied sheep, similar in size to mule deer. Weights of mature rams range from 125 to 200 pounds, while ewes are somewhat smaller. Due to their unique padded hooves, bighorn are able to climb the steep, rocky terrain of the desert mountains with speed and agility. Bighorn rely on their keen eyesight to detect potential predators such as mountain lions, coyotes, and bobcats, and they use their climbing ability to escape.

Both sexes develop horns soon after birth, with horn growth continuing more or less throughout life. Older rams have impressive sets of curling horns measuring over three feet long with more than one foot of circumference at the base. The ewes' horns are much smaller and do not tend to curl. The head and horns of an adult ram may weigh more than 30 pounds. Annual growth rings indicate the animal's age. Both rams and ewes use their horns as tools to break open cactus, which they consume, and for fighting.

Food

Bighorn feed on a wide variety of leaves, twigs, flowers, forbs, grasses, and cacti. In the Mojave Desert a few plants that bighorn are known to forage are palo verde, mormon tea, and Brittlebush .

Desert Bighorn

To many visitors, the bighorn sheep is the epitome of The California desert wilderness areas. Bighorns are a true sheep distantly related to domestic sheep. The name "desert bighorn sheep" applies to bighorn inhabiting hot and dry desert mountain ranges with sparse vegetation and water. Biologists recognize four species of desert bighorn.

The desert bighorn has become well adapted to living in the desert heat and cold and, unlike most mammals, their body temperature can safely fluctuate several degrees. During the heat of the day, bighorn often rest in the shade of trees, cliff overhangs and caves.

Mojave Desert bighorn are typically found in small scattered bands, adapted to a desert mountain environment with little or no permanent water. Some of the bighorn may go without visiting established water source for weeks or months, sustaining their body moisture from food and from rainwater collected in temporary rock pools. They have the ability to lose up to 30 percent of their body weight and still survive. After drinking water, they quickly recover from their dehydrated condition.

Water is a very precious in the desert, **Save it for wildlife!**

CALIFORNIA

DESERT

Bighorn Sheep

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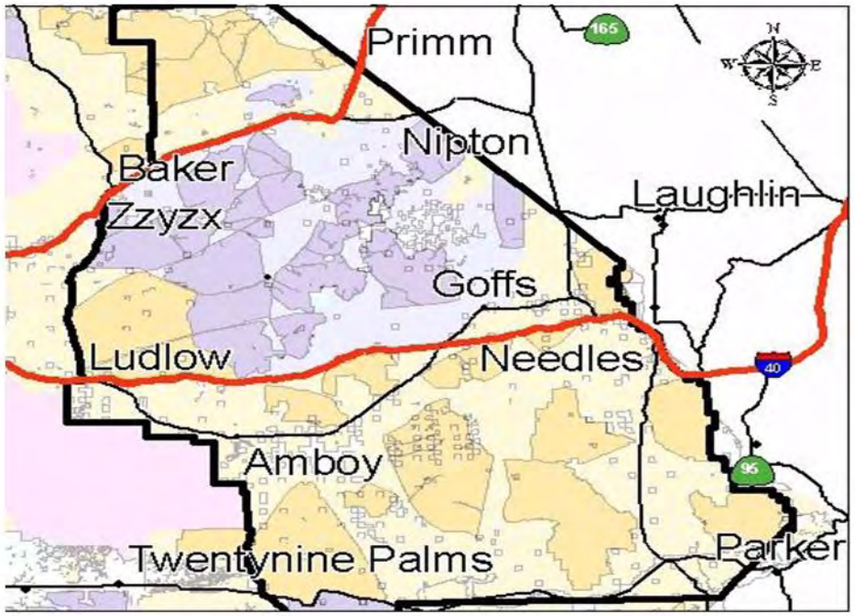

Conservation Efforts

Desert bighorn conservation is accomplished primarily through habitat protection and limiting disturbance and stress from all sources. Big game water source maintenance, active monitoring, and research are some of the tools used.

These efforts involve the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Marines and Army, and the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep as well as individual conservationists. All have contributed greatly to the desert bighorn sheep population recovery effort.

BLM/CA/GI-2009-012+8300

Please Be Advised

Military explosives can be found almost anywhere in the desert. Large areas of the desert were and still are used for bombing ranges and maneuvers by the U.S. Armed Forces. There may be unexploded devices that can cause serious bodily injury or death if handled. Report any such devices to the Federal Interagency Communications Center toll free at (888) 233-6518 or call 911.The Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center borders the western edge of the Needles Field Office Area of responsibility. This is a live bombing range. Do NOT enter the bombing range!

Desert Safety

- Summer temperatures routinely exceed 110° Fahrenheit. Each year people are lost, injured, and sometimes die while visiting desert areas. Take precautions to prevent finding yourself in an emergency situation.

- Always tell someone your plans, or leave a visible note on the dash of your vehicle with your expected route, destination, and time of return. Stick to your itinerary.

- Carry plenty of water. Drink at least a gallon per day.

- Take food or snacks. In the heat, you may not feel hungry, but your body needs nourishment.

- Never go alone.

- Take a good map and compass.

- Carry a first aid kit, signal mirror, flashlight and matches.

- Take a CB radio or cellular phone.

- Wear sunscreen and sunglasses.

- Dress in light colored, loose fitting clothes. Long-sleeves, long pants, a hat, and sturdy shoes will help protect you from the sun, coarse volcanic material, and sharp, spiny vegetation.

- Bring a jacket with you, as evening temperatures may drop 30 degrees or more.

- Make sure your vehicle is in good working condition. Check your tires, spare tire, jack, lug wrench, and fluid levels. Always start with a full tank of gas and try not to let it fall below half a tank before filling up again.

- If you are stranded, stay with your vehicle. Don't panic. Your vehicle is easier to spot than a person walking. Lift your hood. Attempt to signal for help using a mirror or by using newspapers to make an X on the ground.

- Watch for snakes, spiders, and scorpions among the rocks.

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In Case of Emergencies Contact the Federal Interagency Communications Center (FICC) at (888)233-6518 or call 9-1-1.