Initial Steps To Save The Rare Desert Bighorn Sheep Recalled

By ART HALLORAN

WITH National Wildlife Week (March 21-27) at hand, let's drop back 30 years to see the beginning of Desert Bighorn comeback on the newly-created San Andres National Wildlife Refuge in southern New Mexico's San Andres Mountains. I was that refuge's first manager, and, in later years, Havasu Lake and Imperial national wildlife refuges, and the Kofa and Cabeza Prieta game ranges in Arizona, all sanctuaries for Desert Bighorn sheep.

The Desert Bighorn is a native of hot Southwestern American desert ranges. It is closely related to the Rocky Mountain Bighorn that ranges from Colorado north to Canada. These two varieties of America's native sheep are relatives of the all-white Dall Bighorn of Alaska.

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The few remaining Desert Bighorns were dying out and had not been seen by officialdom for years. My job in 1941 —to find the sheep if possible, and put them on the comeback trail. The quest and discovery was a high point in my career. Here's the story as I lived it 30 years ago.

A local lion trapper and I had spent the night on the edge of the bighorn country in a snake-infested, tumbledown stone shack once "home on the range" for a Mexican goatherder. It was 4:45 a.m. when we left the cabin. At 6 a.m., from the top of the range, we located two small moving objects about a mile away. They might be sheep!

For six weeks we had been searching for the small remnant band of less than 40 sheep that ranged the San Andres Mountains of south-central New Mexico. The year was 1941, and the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge had just been created. Aside from a few records by local ranchers, no bighorns had been sighted for years. Were we on their trail at last?

With pounding hearts, the mountain man and I moved closer. We crossed a deep canyon and climbed onto a ridge. Here my companion waited while I crossed another canyon. Since sheep have sharp eyes, I slipped over the rim to avoid being seen on the skyline.

It was not 9:30 a.m., and, although there was the encouraging rattle of rolling rocks in the distance, I vainly combed the canyon with my binoculars for a sight of the sheep. Twenty-five minutes later, I spotted a ewe running down a steep slope toward a rock shelf which was backed by caves. A tiny lamb scampered close at her heels. Then came another with a larger lamb. And there, on the narrow shelf of rock, stood five more sheep—one, an extremely large ram with massive horns! While I watched, he stalked into the largest cave, ducked his head belligerently, and forced a younger ram to retire. He then lay down in the center of the entrance. Careful not to obstruct his view across the canyon, some members of the band rested to one side and to the back of him while the rest of the group lay outside on the narrow ledge.

This was a never-to-be-forgotten moment! Here was rich reward to climax weeks of vain searching and of sleeping near mountain waterholes. Now that the sheep were found, we could devote ourselves to the problems of restoration.

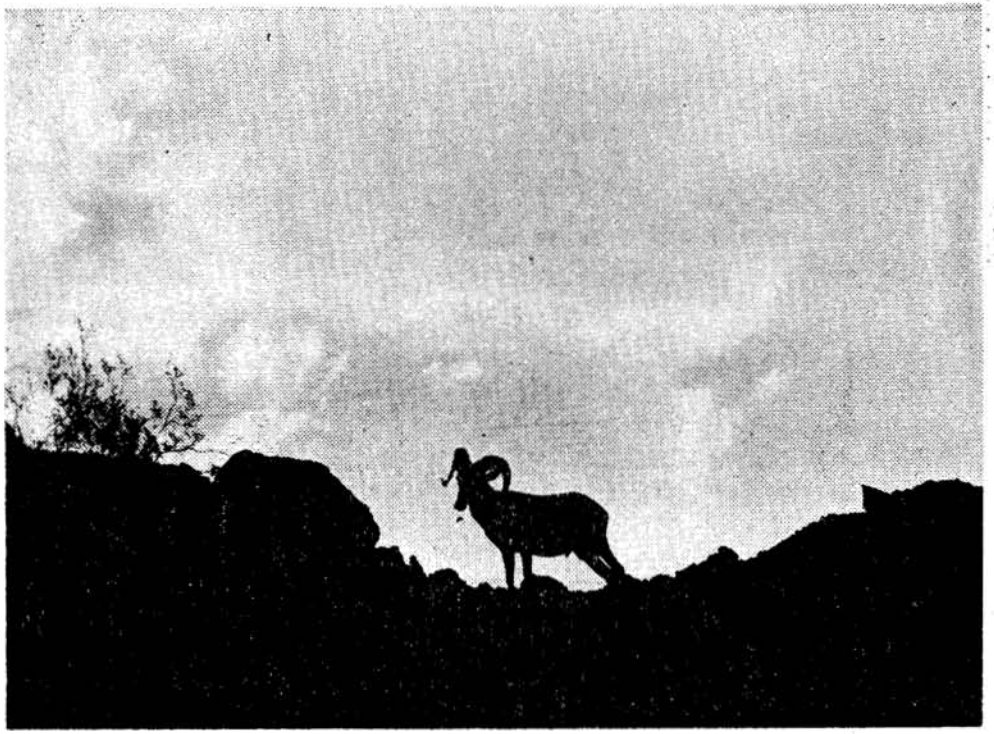
What were the factors that had decimated this herd, and what remedies were to be applied? Did these bighorns have enough forage and adequate range? Were they suffering from competition for food and space from domestic stock and wild game? Were poachers killing them? Was water too scarce? The character of the country and its history provided the answers.

The San Andres Mountains, a semi-desert range, lie in a north and south direction and in places are less than six miles wide. The mountains rise sharply out of comparatively flat country that stretches for miles to the east and west. Originally, these "flats" were without permanent water. Native game did not occur in large numbers on these areas.

As man moved into these grass-covered plains with his domestic cattle, sheep, goats, and horses, he drilled wells and produced permanent water. Livestock became more numerous than the antelope and deer that inhabited the region before the advent of European man. Not only did domestic animals crowd the range and eat the forage; their presence presented a new and greater food supply for carnivores. Mountain lions, bobcats, and coyotes increased as this abundant food supply was literally spread at their feet. Stock raisers became alarmed and started a campaign against predators. Naturally the work of control was done on the easily accessible rolling ranch lands, rather than in the mountains. Thus, for years, increasing numbers of predators drifted through the narrow San Andres range.

As more domestic animals were put on the plains, they grazed higher into the mountains, eating the choicest food. The predators followed. The native bighorn sheep, "squeezed" from east to west, as in a pair of pliers, retreated to the highest, roughest areas where succulent foods were more available and where their native rock-climbing abilities enabled them to elude natural enemies.

Thirty years later, predator control, reduction of feral and domestic livestock, water development, and constant vigilance have put these sheep on the comeback trail. Today's young people will finish the job the oldsters started.



This photo of a Desert Bighorn ram, taken by Bryan Robinson, public use specialist at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, recently won the big animal division of the wildlife photograph contest sponsored by the Oklahoma Zoological Society. This photo was taken along the lower Colorado River on the Havasu Lake National Wildlife Refuge.