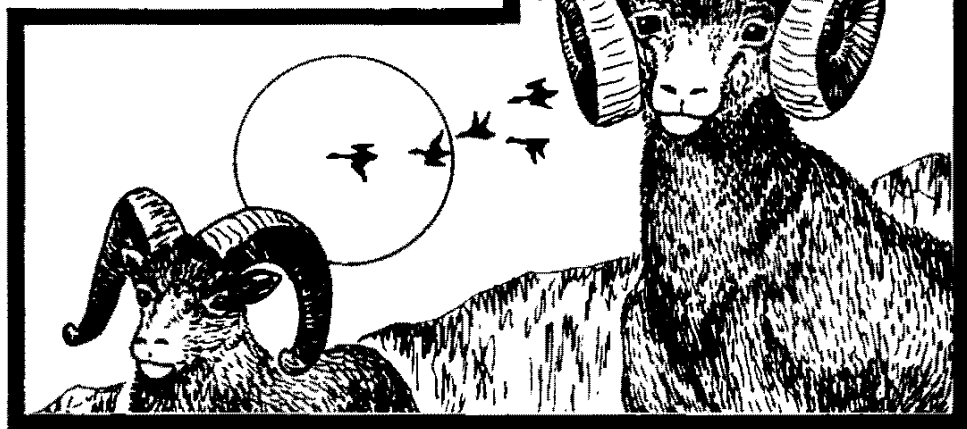


Bighorn Study Identifies Two Viable Herds



A four year study of bighorn sheep in the Sierra Nevada was completed recently by Dr. John Wehausen as part of his doctoral research at the University of Michigan. Supported by a contract from Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, the study identified two viable herds of bighorn remaining in the Sierra Nevada.

Minimum herd sizes of 217 and 30 individuals were established for the Mt. Baxter and Mt. Williamson herds. The Mt. Baxter herd is of special interest to park managers because the sheep summer primarily within the park along the Sierran crest. In winter they drop into the foothills above Owens Valley on land administered by the Inyo National Forest.

The study was undertaken primarily to determine the present status of the Sierra bighorn as well as make recommendations regarding their future management. Known to be widely distributed before the appearance of Europeans in the area, it has been hypothesized that competition with domestic sheep, impact of increasing recreational use and hunting all have had a hand in the drastic decline of the population.

Intensive field study indicates that the Baxter herd has been increasing since the 1960's. Lungworm infection is well below the levels known from other areas and there is no indication that diseases

presently play a significant role in the dynamics of the herd. Similarly, there appears to be little significant competition for forage on either the summer or winter ranges. Neither predation nor human disturbance appear to be significant factors in limiting the population.

Because natural colonization of new ranges is rare in bighorn sheep, it was determined that introduction would be required if expansion of bighorn range in the Sierra Nevada is desired. As part of his study, Wehausen identified a number of likely reintroduction sites based on historical distribution and ability of areas again to support sheep. He also recommended that the Baxter herd was, at the time, healthy enough to serve as stock for reintroduction.

During the last two years a total of 40 sheep have been trapped from the winter range of the Baxter herd. All but 10 of these have been relocated to two sites within their historical range. Many of the sheep have been radio-collared and their movements currently are being followed by California Department of Fish and Game personnel.

Another management action stemming directly from Wehausen's research is closure of all lands above 10,000 feet within the bighorn range to cross country travel. This joint action by Park Service and Forest Service personnel has resulted in significant restrictions on peak climbing in the area.