

Through Darkest New Mexico With Tongue in Cheek – Or The Exotic African Oryx

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What the Devil is an Oryx?

This question has been heard frequently in New Mexico during the past few months as the National Park Service surfaced plans to remove the beasts from White Sands National Monument.

The animal in question is the African Oryx, or Gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), which was introduced into New Mexico in the late 1960s, along with three other exotic animals from the Old World.

The purpose of these introductions is still debatable. Ostensibly, the reasoning had to do with providing huntable populations. Behind this stated purpose was a rationale best described in the book *Pleistocene Extinctions*, by Dr. Paul Martin, which argues that a substantial number of large ungulates became extinct about 10,000 years ago – a situation that Dr. Martin argues was brought about by primitive humans, who found a "naive prey" when they crossed the Bering Straits and swept through North America on their way to fame and fortune in New Mexico and Central America. Dr. Martin and his adherents insist that with the demise of these numerous, large ungulates, an ecological "vacancy" has existed in the southwest for centuries, and the introduction of these species was meant to fill that gap!

Be that as it may, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish began an introduction program to provide huntable populations of several nonnative animals. These include the Barbary sheep, two species of ibex, and the Oryx. There were 93 oryx released between 1969 and 1973; the population in the Tularosa Basin now is around 800 animals. They were released north of White Sands National Monument on land managed by the U.S. Army White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base, east of the Monument.

Through the years, the oryx have extended their range south (and all other points of the compass), until they began to be noticed on the Monument in increasing numbers. They were identified as a problem as early as 1973 in the Resource Management Plan for White Sands. A modest research project led to the conclusion that there were between 50 and 100 oryx on the west and southern portions of the Monument and their range was spreading.

Since NPS policy is clear in regard to exotics, steps were taken to include the oryx in the NPS Natural Resource Preservation Program projects. The proposal included funding to fence the southern and western boundaries of the Monument. Over two years, more than \$400,000 of fencing was built along about 19 miles. The fence, an 11-strand smooth wire creation, was designed by the SW Regional staff for the specific purpose of excluding oryx. These largest of the African antelope have weights at maturity of up to 440 pounds and horn lengths of well over 50 inches.

On May 25, 1985, NPS staff and observers from the New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish and the White Sands Missile Range met to conduct census and removal of the oryx. In 6.4 hours of helicopter

time, 18 animals were driven from the park. The fence had been completed on the southern end of the Monument some two weeks previously, and aerial observations showed a herd of 48 animals which had fortuitously been out of the Monument when the fence was completed.

Approximately 30 percent of the animals removed were juveniles, which indicated a rapidly growing population. Management is difficult because three sides of the Monument are managed by the U.S. Army and our neighbor on the fourth side is Holloman AF Base. Aerial activities must be coordinated well in advance and limited to a few hours each day because of the missile-testing and "star wars" weapons development on adjacent lands.

The north side of the Monument remains unfenced, and how far these animals will move to circumvent the fence is uncertain. The existing fence, however, appears to be successful in preventing ingress. The fence was built with treated wood posts driven at either 16 or 20 feet intervals. Metal posts rapidly de-

teriorate in the calcium sulfate soils of the Monument. Wire strand numbers can be adjusted vertically to meet the particular need. [We, for example, put the first wire 18" above ground to allow American antelope (*Antilocapra americana*) to pass under the fence.] The strands are then stretched to 250 lb./sq. inch. This allows the wires to stretch against a spring but they will not break when hit or pushed on.

The author has, himself, hit the fence at a dead run and been bounced back as though from a trampoline. Other wildlife have shown the same reaction. We feel this type of fence may have applicability in other NPS areas. The cost (\$3.50 per linear foot) is comparable with other high-quality fencing. Details can be obtained from the Division of Natural Resource Management, PO Box 728, Santa Fe, NM 87501.

The oryx problem at White Sands National Monument is not solved. Continued aerial drives will be conducted and both the military and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish will be urged to help deal with the serious exotic ungulate problem on the Monument.



The fence (above) and the fence-tightener (below), specifically designed to help solve the African oryx problem at White Sands National Monument. The tightener stretches wire to 250 pounds per square inch.

