

Olympic Mountain Goat Update

By Paul Crawford

In the 1920s, 12 mountain goats were introduced into what would, in 1938, become Olympic National Park. By the 1980s, their population had grown to more than 1000 animals. Mountain goats, though a native North American mammal, are not native to the Olympic Peninsula; serious damage to the park ecosystem from their presence has been documented.

Park research on goats and their effects on native ecosystems has taken place from the 1970s to the present. Work has concentrated on impacts to soils and vegetation (including rare and threatened plants), biology of goats, sterilization/contraception as a population control, and live capture methods. Subject matter professionals from around the country have been consulted for advice and peer review in several aspects of the issue. A number of papers resulting from goat research have been published in refereed journals.

The park has written two prior NEPA documents: a 1981 environmental assessment on experimental management and a 1987 assessment on the first management plan. Many public meetings were conducted.

Between 1981 and 1989, 407 goats were live-captured, removed from the park, and released elsewhere in Washington and other western states. The live-capture program cost the park an average of approximately \$1,000 per goat in 1989. In 1988, after 10 years of peer-reviewed research (including experimental live removals) and completion of the second assessment, the park began a goat management program that stipulated continued live-capture removals, with an option of shooting by park rangers to be considered in 1991. This program was terminated a year early, due to unacceptably high risk to park personnel and a rising mortality rate for goats during the capture operations. Practically speaking, the program had reached the limits of population reductions that could be achieved through live capture.

Current Status

In 1991 the Olympic National Forest (NF) and Washington State Department of Wildlife (WDW) joined with the park to form the Interagency Goat Management Team (IGMT). Within the park, NPS has sole management jurisdiction over all wildlife. On adjacent goat range in Olympic NF, the

USFS manages the habitat, while the State manages the wildlife. The team's goal was to cooperate in writing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for mountain goat management on the entire Olympic Peninsula.

In January 1992, the IGMT sponsored a series of four scoping meetings, soliciting public comment on concerns and ideas that should be incorporated into a draft EIS. Alternatives for the park include no action, control (reduction) of sub-populations, and total elimination from the park.

At this date, problems have arisen with the differing agency mandates and policies, and although the State and Forest Service will continue to assist in the planning process, the EIS will apply only within the park.

Scientific issues related to the mountain goat program have undergone thorough academic scrutiny. The park's long-term study of goats and their effects on plants and soils was submitted for peer review last spring, was revised to reflect the reviewers' comments, and has been completed in final form. A peer review of sterilization and contraception techniques conducted in October 1991 determined that none of the techniques is feasible at this time. A thorough search of historical and archeological records has been conducted to answer any lingering doubts about the exotic status of the goats. The information from this records search also will undergo technical evaluation by subject matter experts.

Scrutiny in the print and broadcast media has been exhaustive, both locally and nationally, with recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Geographic*, and *Reader's Digest*. There is strong and rapidly growing interest in this issue, with opposition being voiced by animal rights groups and strong support for goat elimination coming from conservation organizations.

Finally, the NPS Pacific Northwest Regional Office and the Washington Office have reviewed the research, policy, operational constraints, and law, and have accepted the park's analysis of the issue and recommended that it proceed with developing a DES. The matter is being viewed as a major test of NPS policies on exotic species management.

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