

Help monitor bighorn sheep  
and other species at risk  
by reporting sightings to:  
1-866-699-WILD (9453)

Produced by:  
The South Okanagan-Similkameen  
Stewardship Program

Supported by:



# LIVING IN CALIFORNIA BIGHORN SHEEP HABITAT



photo: Laure Neish

## Co-existing with Wild Sheep in the South Okanagan



South Okanagan-  
Similkameen  
Stewardship Program

To report sick or dead sheep, call:  
Ministry of Environment  
(250) 490-8200

For more information on how  
you can help, contact:  
SOS Stewardship Program  
#201 - 262 Main Street  
Penticton, BC V2A 5B2  
(250) 492-0173

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photo: Laure Neish

## Bighorns Then and Now

The California Bighorn Sheep you see through the window of your home or as you drive through the South Okanagan were once distributed widely throughout the dry grasslands and rugged terrain of the Southern Interior. Unfortunately, only small populations of wild sheep now occur within this historical range. In British Columbia, bighorn sheep are considered a species of special concern due to habitat loss and degradation, as well as sensitivity to human activities and disturbances.

Since a considerable amount of summer and winter habitat occurs on private land, landowners can play a vital role in helping to ensure the continued survival of this magnificent species.

## Sharing Habitat with Wild Sheep

If you live on the east side of the Okanagan Valley, you are probably living in an area which is traditional habitat for bighorn sheep. In order to survive, sheep have a number of specific requirements including:

- South to southwest-facing grassy slopes for winter forage
- Summer forage at higher elevations
- Traditional breeding areas
- Nearby steep escape terrain for lambing and avoiding predators
- Movement corridors
- Water sources
- Mineral licks
- Limited disturbance from humans and dogs



photo: Lisa Scott



# LANDOWNERS PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN ENSURING THE SURVIVAL OF BIGHORN SHEEP

## Stresses on the Population

California Bighorn Sheep have lost habitat to urban expansion and agricultural development, while forest ingrowth and invasive plants have decreased the quality of remaining rangeland. Sheep feed on and use traditional areas and do not adapt well when displaced. Many years of fire suppression have resulted in unnaturally dense forests that reduce range further and restrict the sight lines needed by the sheep to detect and avoid predators.

Bighorns are susceptible to diseases, particularly when nutrition is poor and disturbances from human activities, dogs, or other factors, are prolonged and frequent. Wild sheep are very susceptible to diseases commonly carried by domestic sheep and goats. Research has shown that contact is often followed by disease fatal to the bighorns.

In the winter of 1999-2000, the South Okanagan herd suffered a major die-off from bacterial pneumonia. This reduced the population by 60-75%. There was evidence that respiratory disease was transmitted from domestic sheep in the early stages of the die-off. In response, the bighorn sheep recovery plan recommended keeping the two species separate to avoid future disease episodes.



photo: Peter Stockdale

## What Is Being Done?

Inventory, research, sheep transplants, and the purchase and management of important sheep habitat have all been part of the cooperative effort\* to ensure the future of this bighorn population. The South Okanagan Bighorn Sheep Advisory Group was initiated to help guide the recovery efforts.



photo: Laure Neish

Current activities include:

- Researching health, survival, and population dynamics
- Stewardship initiatives such as habitat conservation with landowners
- Thinning of forests and prescribed fires
- Fencing to reduce highway mortality
- Lessening the risk of disease transfer from domestic sheep and goats (concern and cooperation from domestic producers have supported this effort).

\* Includes the Ministry of Environment, Université de Sherbrooke, South Okanagan California Bighorn Sheep Recovery Project, local experts, First Nations, conservation organizations, sportsmen, stakeholders and private landowners.

## How Can You Help?

Today, we see strong evidence that our bighorns are well on the road to recovery but they still need our help.



- Do not raise domestic sheep or goats as pets or livestock within bighorn sheep range.
- Keep dogs under control, to prevent the harassment or killing of sheep and other wildlife.
- Enjoy sheep from a distance by using binoculars.
- Be extremely cautious around rams during the rutting season in November, at which time they are aggressive and may charge you.
- Avoid lambing areas from April to late June, to reduce stress on lambs and ewes.
- Drive slowly when sheep are near roadways.
- Work with your neighbours to retain natural movement corridors.
- Retain areas of natural habitat on your land, including ponds and springs.
- Plant native species such as bunchgrasses, antelope-brush, sagebrush, saskatoon and mock orange that provide food for sheep.
- Learn about options for invasive plant management.
- Keep grasslands undisturbed by walking or driving only on established roads or trails.
- Find out more about the benefits of prescribed fires for enhancing bighorn habitat and for public safety.

## Associated Species at Risk

A number of other wildlife species occurring within sheep habitat are at risk. Protecting habitat for bighorn sheep will also benefit these species:



Photos: Canyon Wren and White Headed

Woodpecker by Steve Cannings;

Pallid Bat by Mark Brigham;

Badger by Bill Harper;

Rubber Boa by Jared Hobbs

Help spread the word about  
how to live in harmony with  
bighorn sheep