

The sun silhouettes several desert bighorn sheep at Willow Beach, along the Colorado River in Northwestern Arizona.
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COUNTING SHEEP

For thousands of years, desert bighorns were a common sight in the Santa Catalina Mountains. By the 1980s, however, their numbers had dwindled to about 200, and in 2005, they disappeared altogether. Last fall, about 30 sheep were reintroduced to the area. Will they survive? Or does it even matter?

An Essay by
Charles Bowden



THEY WATCHED US FROM THE MOUNTAINS. The people drifted in thousands of years ago. The abandoned Hohokam villages of the valley once hosted tens of thousands. The first mission at San Xavier del Bac went up in the late 17th century; the presidio that became Tucson arrived on a Spanish lance in 1775. The railroad came on March 20, 1880 — the Tohono O’odham noted that on that very day their powerful spirit, P’ittoi, drove the game away to safety.

The modern city spread across the desert after the Second World War, the cre-

ation of a vast migration into the region.

And desert bighorns watched all this from their sanctuary on the western reaches of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

Now they have vanished.

The question is whether we can live with this new emptiness.

THE ANSWER BEGINS for me one evening in a canyon knifing down from the high country to the desert below. My bag spreads out on the ground under a gallery of cottonwoods and sycamores. A narrow ribbon of sky dribbles light between the cliffs, but the sun leaves early here. Toward evening, falling rocks break the silence. The stones come from the hooves of desert bighorns as they work the cliffs towering over me.

At that time, I had never seen a desert bighorn outside of a zoo. They were a phantom to me, an animal that could survive intense heat in places of little water, move through hard country, stare out with eyes of massive power, weigh up to 225 pounds and yet remain all but invisible to the rest of us.

As a boy I would stare at the palisades and ridges of the Catalinas and know bighorns roamed up there and that they were looking down at me. Tucson depends on the front range for its emotional well-being. A local paper once ran a doctored photograph of how the city would appear without the mountains. It chilled everyone.

Saguaros stud the lower slopes amid scattered jojoba, cholla, paloverde and mesquite. Above, piñon pine, juniper and oak come in with a hint of the cool reaches of the high country. On the western flank, Pima Canyon flows down from Pusch Ridge and at the bottom a gap in the rock wall forms a gateway to the steep world of the bighorns. To go past this point and climb is to enter a world where the wild things linger.

I was the kid who found school boring but could look out a classroom window and disappear into imagined wilds. But while I dreamed, the desert bighorns of the mountain were slowly dying. By the '80s, maybe 200 lingered in the Catalinas, and these survivors had abandoned 80 percent of their historic range. The creation of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness in the late '70s failed to stop this decline. The last sheep was seen in 2005. The mountain fell silent; the clatter of rocks off the cliffs stopped.

The herd was hurled into oblivion by houses dibbling at the very edges of the wilderness area, the dream homes we build so we can taste those wilds. The herd was maimed by our hikes with pet dogs that terrified the sheep, by the slow but certain encirclement of the mountain by our communities that cut off migration routes between the mountain ranges and ended any hope of new blood. It was not a simple thing, or a deliberate thing, or a desired thing. But it was a fatal thing for the sheep.

The mountain changed, and then the wilderness felt hollow. North America once held maybe 2 million native sheep, with desert bighorns as an arid-adapted segment. The numbers toppled in the late 19th century. Cattle and domestic sheep took the water and the range and brought in new diseases that ravaged the native bighorns. Now, maybe 45,000 sheep survive in the Rocky Mountains, and 20,000 in the hot deserts. Arizona harbors about 6,000. They

At dusk, low clouds shroud Pusch Ridge, part of the Santa Catalina Mountains. The area once was home to a large population of desert bighorns.

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cling to a few hot rocky islands in the sea of our kind and our needs.

Years after that evening in the canyon with rocks clattering off the cliff as sheep move over my head, I finally come into their country and meet them face to face. The day is very hot, the heat rides at about a hundred and ten, and I'm 50 miles or so from any paved highway in a desert wilderness. After dark, a coyote crawls near my bedroll and howls briefly each and every night. I sleep under a moonless sky of stars. In the gray light of morning I walk to the water hole. There is a blind, and I count the dozens of bighorns that gather in the inferno of June. For a day or two I bake in the airless chamber and then I decide the sheep are not fooled. So I sit on the rock outside and keep my tally. Rams walk within 15 feet of me as I scrawl notes. They look too big and strong to have come out of this hot world of black rock, ironwood, paloverde and struggling mesquite. The water hole is in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, ground where archaeologists have yet to find any sign of a permanent human settlement.

I spend a week or 10 days out there alone. At night I listen to the stars hum; during the day I watch the sheep. They soon cease to pay much heed to me and as they move up and down the rock faces, I am bewitched and kind of humbled. I can barely get by during a brief visit to the heat. They maintain a culture, a nation, and raise young on the same ground.

To glimpse a whale is to feel instantly the vast deeps of the ocean. To see a bighorn almost floating across a cliff face is to become for a moment part of the rock and desert.

MY LIFE HAS BEEN DESERTS. I have walked for days across ground without a single track of my kind, spent nights on the baked ground where the temperature hovered over a hundred degrees at midnight. Sometimes, I have made it to the edge of my dreams. When I was with the sheep that first time at the water hole, a golden eagle would come in each day to drink and bathe while I watched from rock maybe 50 feet away. After that, a red-tailed hawk, then a family of turkey vultures. All this happened like clockwork each day. The world felt fresh then, like the morning of creation.

Now there is a plan for repopulating the official wilderness on Pusch Ridge, a place where by law we can visit but never stay. Bighorns in other ranges were captured and moved there. The banishment of dogs will be sternly enforced. Mountain lions may be killed at times in order to bring back the herd. At first, about 30 sheep have been brought in. If everything works as hoped, the herd will eventually number a hundred plus and sustain itself. This is not a perfect thing. The bighorns will most likely be genetically isolated from the nearest remnant band in the Silverbells,

a range now walled off from Pusch Ridge by the highways and houses of our kind. This is a growing reality for other species in the Southwest. Desert-tortoise populations, for example, now endure in genetically isolated pockets. The pronghorns are caged everywhere by their reluctance to face down barbed wire. Critics of the re-establishment question whether such a herd can endure. This is a fair point. State game-and-fish people and various environmental groups think it is worth trying.

This country is always torn between preserving the past and paving it over. The last sheep was seen in the Tucson Mountains near downtown in the early '50s; a grizzly bear had been sighted in the Rincon Mountains that form a wall on the eastern side of the valley as late as 1922. The mountains that cradle the valley have filled my life with one thought: Up there is where the wild things live and our control ends. There are holes in the world created by our lives here and this gnaws at me. The initial bill in 1964 creating wilderness areas came from just such a recognition of both things that had been lost and things that must be regained.

There was a time I went to Pusch Ridge. I went up Pima Canyon, then ascended to Table Mountain, which ends in a jagged ridge-line where the mountain is sawed off and becomes cliffs on the face looking toward Oro Valley. The climb was steep and meant a bushwhack across a belt of small agaves that gouged the shins. At the beginning it was a beautiful fall day, sky blue, sun warm. The city below receded until it looked like something constructed for a model-train set. And then suddenly a storm came up and with it a downpour. I was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. The temperature sank; I got soaked. The shaking began as I slid into a condition known as hypothermia, where the core temperature of the body collapses. This can kill you. I got under a big overhang, shucked my clothes, crawled into my sleeping bag. The shelter was rank with scent and sign that said it was the sometime lair of a mountain lion. The storm lifted; the sun came out.

I looked down and saw the arroyos of Tucson writhing with a brown rush of water amid the safe streets and orderly rows of houses. On the mountain, I tasted the gales of life.

FOR YEARS I have carried in my head a thought tossed out by Aldo Leopold. In the early 20th century, he worked for the U.S. Forest Service in Eastern Arizona, and he killed a wolf to protect the cattle and increase the deer. He went on to become a pioneer in wildlife management and a leading conservationist. He wrote an essay about that killing. He'd decided that when he'd pulled the trigger and helped remove the wolf from the Southwest, he'd made the mountain a lesser place. He said we had to learn to think like a mountain.

I stare into the gate of rock framing the entrance to Pima Canyon. The mesquite leaves hang listless in the heat. Underfoot, a broken field of granite spreads out. Past that stone gate, the freedom of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness begins. The place feels wanting without bighorns watching me. I can't prove this. But I've known it since I was a boy.

That's why we look at the mountains and crave to be near them.

Maybe we can't think like a mountain. But we can do better than we have. We can bring the bighorns back where they belong. [AH](#)



ABOVE: Desert bighorn sheep appear in petroglyphs in Saguaro National Park, near Tucson.

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LEFT: Four desert bighorn sheep – two males and two females – congregate on a cliffside along the Colorado River. According to some estimates, the nationwide bighorn population is only about 10 percent of what it was before the West was settled.

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