

## SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT TROPHY HUNTING

By  
James K. Morgan  
Stevensville, Montana

I am questioning trophy hunting for three major reasons. They are:

- I. Objective scientists have an obligation to question everything until it can be repeated or tested until it stands proven.

It has been my observation, in dealing with the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Game Departments, that a tendency toward manager/user alliances seems to creep into management philosophy. We are basically an exploitive-consumptive society and exploitive attitudes have a way of permeating our activities. The battle cry about which this exploitation rallies is, for the Forest Service, "Trees not cut are wasted," for the BLM, "Grass not eaten by cows is wasted," and the Fish and Game, "Rams not harvested by hunters are wasted." I'm waiting for an ecologically pure definition of "waste."

Is the science of ecology advanced enough to prove that unused trees, grass and rams are wasted? Is there always such a thing as "excess"? I think those are unanswered questions, particularly in view of the cyclic nature of living systems. Energy flows are dependent on a matrix of physical and behavioral interactions. Can you remove anything from an ecosystem without affecting its energy flows? Without affecting its capacity for life processes? Ecologically, our definitions of waste and excess should be carefully questioned because of our presumptuous flair for making definitions that serve our desires.

When speaking of the manager/user alliance, it is important to understand the insidious nature of bias and to recognize that the manager is often the last to become aware of his own subservience to economic exploitation. He cannot see the forest for the trees. In fact, the pro-hunting bias is just as real as the anti-hunting bias. Both are biases because they reflect the desires of humans, sometimes to the detriment of the animal involved. Biases are best dealt with by admitting them and keeping them out front. They become dangerous only when we fail to recognize them, fail to admit them, or define our own bias as good and the other guy's bias as bad. Man has long hunted bighorns for food. That could be considered neutral, since it is part of the evolutionary pattern of both species. But head hunting for trophies and recreation is a pro-hunting bias that serves up rams as fodder for the recreation mill to feed the gross national product; an activity that exploits bighorns to serve the economics of recreation. Let us be aware of our bias.

There is substantial evidence for the pro-hunting bias. People who license the recreational hunting of bighorns on a rams-only basis have applied this treatment to bighorns for some 20 years or more without first investigating the effects of rams-only hunting. Then, when questioned, they point to the lack of evidence to show that there are any effects from head hunting. This is an abdication of their responsibilities, since those who license the killing are responsible to provide the evidence that it is not harmful. And one can draw small comfort from the lack of data to show head hunting harmful to bighorns since no one has ever looked for that possibility. An analogy to the

head hunting treatment applied to bighorns would be the release of a new drug on the market without prior testing, haphazard monitoring of its effects, and defense of the drug based on the lack of evidence which was never collected. And, of course, if the new drug is used until its effects do appear, the question of how damaging and irreversible those effects might turn out to be becomes rather crucial. If I had a herd of bighorns and someone applied for the job of managing them under a "shoot now, pay later" plan I wouldn't hire him.

Fish and Game Departments have not displayed capacity for self-examination in their research or management. Monitoring data which might reveal effects from hunting has been incomplete, and often not diligently collected. Research has been heavily slanted to support and facilitate hunting. Gunners are sent after transplanted herds before the herds get their feet on the ground, and isolated remnant herds are hunted until they literally disappear. For example:

(a) The Morgan Creek herd in Idaho declined drastically during the early 1900's and then recovered somewhat under subsequent protection from hunting. It was opened to hunting again in 1953 and hunted continuously under three-quarter curl open season regulations for 19 years, and closed again in 1972. A study was initiated on the herd in 1966 because it was known to be declining and the study documented the fact that it was indeed in a serious decline. Yet hunting was continued on the herd for 7 years after it was known to be declining and was not closed until the herd dropped well below 100 animals. The herd shows no sign of recovery at present. Although range deterioration is known to be this herd's major problem, the herd has declined much faster than the range condition and the possibility that trophy hunting and associated stresses, when added to the already serious habitat problems, were not contributing factors in this herd's decline have yet to be disproven.

(b) The East Fork of the Salmon River herd also declined drastically during the early 1900's and then recovered somewhat under subsequent protection from hunting. It was again opened to hunting under the three-quarter curl regulation in 1954 and hunted until 1961, a total of 8 years. During this period of hunting the population declined in both ram component and numbers, as did the Morgan Creek herd. The average population count, verified by intensive helicopter counts of a rather small winter range, was 49 animals for the last 5 years it was hunted. Hunting was closed after the helicopter count revealed only three mature rams left on the winter range. This herd has shown no signs of recovery after 12 years of protection. Again, habitat was the major problem, yet the role of trophy hunting was never questioned as a contributing factor, despite the fact that such reduced, isolated, remnant herds with habitat and human accessibility problems would be most vulnerable to the effects of hunting and losing large rams. Inbreeding becomes a mathematical possibility in a population that has dropped below 50 animals and is constantly losing breeding rams.

Similar situations have occurred with the Rock Creek herd in Montana, the Billy Creek herd on Charles M. Russell Wildlife Range, and the Two Calf herd on Charles M. Russell Wildlife Range. For the sake of time I will not elaborate on them.

The point is that remnant, isolated herds with severe problems and high accessibility to human activities may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of trophy hunting.

I submit that there is a pro-hunting bias and that it is not accompanied by a healthy recognition of self-examination. It is my belief that, in the future, game managers will increasingly be forced to confront the moral and ethical questions of hunting small, isolated remnant herds until they reach the point of no return.

- II. My second reason for questioning trophy hunting has to do with diversity. It is a well established fact that diversity is health in living systems. And that applies to management as well. Although some generalities apply to all bighorns, still each herd has its own specific potentials, conditions and problems. A diversity conscious management approach would be to devise management systems, or systems of nonmanagement if called for, to fit the needs of each herd. There are tremendous probabilities against a single dominant approach being beneficial to or suiting the needs of all bighorn herds. I submit that rams-only hunting is a nonmanagement approach, applied to all bighorn herds regardless of their needs, and that it is neither a diverse or healthy approach to management. For example, Alaska has a larger ratio of habitat and bighorns to its human population and demands and therefore can probably continue to hunt bighorns for some time yet. But for those of us with a reversed ratio, human demands will require new, imaginative, diverse approaches to cope with the future lest the manager himself become an endangered species.

Another disadvantage of rams-only hunting is that it tends to narrow your management options. If you have a herd that seriously needs some ewes removed, you may be shackled by public resistance created by long dependence on and ritualization of trophy hunting. The thing that frightens me about the continued socialization of trophy hunting is that it effectively forces managers into programs to fit a social demand instead of the biological necessity. That is a strong reason for curbing trophy hunting. One of the major problems with dominant management concepts is that they tend to mask or suppress alternatives and then use the lack of alternatives as a reason why the dominant concept should prevail.

Diversity also relates to the political future of managers. A diversity of management philosophies would command that bighorns be managed to suit the desires of both hunters and nonhunters. For example, Idaho's Salmon River Wilderness is an area where man's influence is minimal, less in many ways than even in national parks. This area would be a perfect place to preserve a primal gene pool without worrying about overpopulation and range degradation, and if not hunted, would offer bighorn experiences to far more people, since recreationists now outnumber hunters. The few hunting permits given for the area each year keep the bighorns wild and unavailable to other users and represent special treatment for a hunter minority. Nonmanagement of bighorns would serve both bighorns and the needs of more people. Continued hunting of such an area illustrates the lack of diversity in philosophical approaches that feed the anti-hunting movement.

The hunters' "I pay your wages so should receive preferential treatment" argument is an encroachment on the biologist's objectivity. Hunting is a tool of wildlife management, not the reason for its existence. The Wyoming example impressed me. Hunters in Idaho mostly finance the facilitation of their own activities, but when hunters start buying habitat, then they have a valid point and should be allowed to hunt those areas. The hunters' argument on money loses much of its force when it is noted the activities that directly benefit the hunter and fisherman consume most of their monetary input.

The state of California has legislation prohibiting hunting of bighorns in California. People who seek nonconsumptive experiences with animals increasingly feel that trophy hunting, because it involves killing, is a barbaric practice. They increasingly resent the lack of management tailored to fit non-consumptive needs and they are growing in awareness, numbers, and political power. The predatory outlook of management biologists is becoming increasingly repugnant to these people. An anti-hunting tide, similar to the one that swept the country in the early 1900's, is slowly rising in the country for much the same reasons - declining numbers of wildlife. Preventative diversity, because it would recognize the needs and desires of these people as well as hunters, would be a good tool to help slow the tide. If managers continue to defend trophy hunting, my prediction is that they will only hasten the day of confrontation between hunters and nonhunters. Survival for the manager, as for any creature is to diversify.

- III. The third and final reason I'm opposed to rams-only hunting is because I feel that isolated, remnant bighorn herds with high accessibility to human activities and poor ranges are highly vulnerable to the effects of any human activities that could increase stress, remove strong individuals or disrupt social organization.

Bighorns are vulnerable, because of their habitat preferences and behavior, to efficient selection for large rams by hunters where their numbers are reduced, habitats altered, and herds fragmented and isolated. Their social systems may be adversely affected by reductions in herd size, impact of human activities on habitat, fragmentation of herds, removal of important individuals from small herds, and the stresses of hunting. Bighorns have specific problems and the application of elk biology is a dangerous over-simplification that does not recognize bighorn's needs. The study of diseases and parasites, because it diverts money that could be put into habitat, tends to relegate bighorns to the "free-roaming domestic herd" category, (and I do feel it is very important to draw distinctions between wild bighorns and free-roaming domestic herds). An acre of ground that the bighorn can call his own is more valuable to him than a dozen disease and parasitologists.

Bighorns are vulnerable to over-simplified application of elk biology, to the impact of human activities, and to nonmanagement based on the manager/user alliance. Because of this vulnerability, I am opposed to management as the only alternative, believing that nonmanagement is also an important alternative. And because our preoccupation with technology tends to blind us to the aesthetic, I am opposed to turning all bighorns, or even very many of them, into free-roaming, doctored, babied and fed domestic herds.

It is my recommendation to this group that:

- (1) Trophy hunting as a dominant management concept be deemphasized and either sex hunting, reversed three-quarter curl hunting, and no hunting at all be initiated in those situations where such changes are compatible with the needs of bighorns in order to diversify bighorn management and philosophy.
- (2) That all hunting be stopped on isolated, remnant herds of less than 250 total bighorns.
- (3) That the Idaho Salmon River Wilderness be set aside as a bighorn sheep primal gene pool and all trapping, tagging and management be curtailed in the area.

- (4) Data from hunter-killed bighorn sheep be scrupulously collected and analyzed to monitor the possible effects of hunting.
- (5) The definition of the three-quarter curl regulation be revised so that only rams 10 years old or older may be legally hunted, and that all hunters attend mandatory training sessions prior to hunting bighorns. Hunting bighorn sheep is a rare privilege and requires a high degree of responsibility from hunters, which is a minimal price to pay for the right to hunt them.
- (6) Curtail all noncontrolled hunting and hunt bighorns only on permits in order to maintain strict control over hunter distribution and harvest.
- (7) Research on the effects of trophy-type hunting on bighorn sheep be initiated in all states where they are hunted.
- (8) Ask Boone and Crockett Club to take bighorns from the record book and seek to deemphasize trophy hunting as a means of managing bighorn sheep.
- (9) That the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife be asked to place certain diminished, isolated herds on the endangered species list so that greater control can be exercised over the conflicting uses of their habitat as provided for in the newly passed public law 93-205 relating to endangered species. This law provides for the inclusion of species on a regional basis, if needed.