



# WILD SHEEP Foundation

By Gray Thornton

Photos courtesy of Steve Kline

Founded in 1977 and known formerly as the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS), the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF)—much like the Boone and Crockett Club—enjoys national and international mission accomplishments far exceeding its modest membership size.

Unlike Rocky Mountain elk, mule and whitetail deer, the iconic bighorn lacked sufficient population numbers and hunting opportunities, and hence, license and tag fees to pay its way. Responding to the lack of state and provincial funding to properly manage and repatriate wild sheep to their native range, and faced with near-historical all-time bighorn population lows in the 1960s and '70s, several visionary sheep hunters met in Wisconsin in 1974 to swap sheep and mountain hunting stories and to discuss the plight of wild sheep throughout their range. This humble beginning became the genesis of FNAWS and the formation of one of the most effective and influential wildlife conservation organizations in the world whose purpose is Putting and Keeping Sheep on the Mountain™.

With private funding from members and donors, an annual convention known as the The Sheep Show™ and in 1980 with the sale of the first Governor's Tag from Wyoming, FNAWS and its partners began funding initiatives throughout North America to accomplish its purpose. Millions of dollars were raised and put "on the mountain" for wild sheep. Trap and transplants were conducted in the West, initially bringing bighorns south from Alberta and British Columbia. Wildlife swaps spawned stories of wild turkeys being transported in private jets and traded for desert bighorn sheep. Relocation maps showing sheep transfers now look like an airline route map for a successful Western air carrier. FNAWS, its chapters and affiliates, members, and agency partners put sheep on the

mountains throughout their historical range. The results are a modern-day wildlife success story: Rocky Mountain, California, and desert bighorn sheep, which numbered an estimated 17,000 in the 1960s have been expanded four-fold—to more than 70,000 today.

Of course, this incredible increase in sheep has also increased hunter opportunities. In 1958, Montana issued 65 permits, and 59 sheep were harvested. In 2010, Montana issued 151 bighorn permits, and 136 were harvested. Wyoming issued 148 permits in 1958, and 71 were harvested. In 2010, Wyoming issued 256 permits, and 211 bighorns were taken. Interestingly, Colorado issued 211 permits in both 1958 and in 2010. In 1958, only 51 sheep were harvested compared to 118 in 2010. One of the finest bighorn comeback stories is Nevada which had only a remnant population of bighorns in the 1960s. Today, Nevada boasts more than 10,000 wild sheep made up of Rocky Mountain, California, and desert bighorn sheep. In 1958, Nevada offered 80 sheep permits and harvested 30. In 2011, the Silver State offered 285 tags and harvested 244!

This conservation success is a credit to the more than 10,000 WSF affiliated chapters and affiliate members worldwide, their thousands of man-hours of labor, dedication, and dollars that have contributed to bringing wild sheep back from the brink. But the work is not done. Knowledge gained from hundreds of thousands of dollars in disease research has proven unequivocally that the primary threat to keeping sheep on the mountain is ensuring domestic sheep and goats are separated both spatially and temporally from bighorns. WSF is again leading the efforts to protect wild sheep from bacteria from domestic stock while working with the domestic sheep industry to seek collaborative solutions to this deadly problem.

During the 2011-'12 fiscal year, WSF raised and put on the ground more than \$3.6 million to mission programs benefiting wild sheep, other wildlife, their habitats, and those who pursue them. This stunning amount equates to more than \$700 per member annually. For every membership dollar received, WSF puts \$16 on the



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## BIGHORN SHEEP THEN AND NOW:

Estimated Bighorn/Desert Bighorn Populations

	1960	2011	% Increase
Nevada	Remnant	10,000	
Colorado	3,000	7,500	250%
Wyoming	2,000	6,500	325%
Montana	1,700	5,100	300%
Utah	Remnant	5,000	
Texas	Remnant	1,100	
Washington	Remnant	1,700	
Arizona	3,500	5,500	57%
California	2,500	4,800	92%
Oregon	25	4,200	1680%
Idaho	2,800	2,900	3%

SOURCES: BUECKNER MONOGRAPH (1960) AND WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF FISH & WILDLIFE AGENCIES (2011 DATA)

ground in mission programs—a 16 to 1 ratio unmatched in our industry. Combined with our chapters and affiliates, WSF has raised and contributed more than \$85 million to its mission of Putting and Keeping Sheep on the Mountain since its founding.

WSF launched two innovative programs in 2012 to compliment its mission. The inaugural “Youth Wildlife Conservation Experience” (YWCE) was held during the Foundation’s January 2012 convention in Reno, Nevada, and introduced youth in grades 5–12 to the shooting sports, archery, fly-fishing, conservation, wildlife management and wildlife forensics during the three-day event. The YWCE is funded through an endowed grant from MidwayUSA Foundation and founders Larry and Brenda Potterfield. The WSF YWCE program is expanding in 2013 to include more than 600 youth participants at the 2013 YWCE during The Sheep Show in Reno and will include similar, but downsized events within WSF chapter and affiliates ranks under the organization’s new Shooting Hunting Ethics Education Program (SHEEP)—also generously underwritten by a grant from Larry and Brenda Potterfield. As a component of the SHEEP initiative, WSF is partnering with the Boone and Crockett Club to send youth from throughout North America to B&C’s Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in the summer of 2013.

There are many programs to recognize sheep and mountain hunters, but what about aspiring sheep hunters? Responding to this need, WSF launched the innovative <1 Club (Less Than One Club). A basic tenet of organizations like WSF is that people join because they like to be around other people who share their beliefs, interests, and goals and/or have shared experiences. Hunting/conservation organizations capitalize on this by either being species specific or offering other shared purposes such as hunting advocacy, youth and/or broad-based education, other mission programs or regional interests.

During the WSF Saturday night grand finale banquet in Reno this past January, several young WSF members who are aspiring sheep hunters lamented that WSF did not have any program in place for “them”—hunters who have not yet taken a wild sheep ram. WSF and many other organizations with award and hunting recognition programs recognize either a notable sheep or goat or a collection. But, WSF did not have any program designed specifically for the aspiring sheep hunter—the man or woman who dutifully enters the state/provincial lottery drawings waiting for their lucky day, or who have not yet purchased a North American or international sheep hunt (or, if they have, have not yet pulled the trigger and taken a ram). That night, a concept was floated and in the weeks following the WSF 2012 convention, the <1 Club was born!

<1 Club membership is open to those aspiring sheep hunters who have not yet taken a wild ram. Membership in the Club includes a special <1 Club logo t-shirt and entry into a drawing for either a fannin sheep

hunt with Midnight Sun Outfitters in the Yukon or Dall’s sheep hunt with Lazy J Bar O Outfitters in Alaska. Both hunts will be drawn Friday night, February 1st in Reno during WSF’s 2013 convention. Hunt winners also receive a four-day SAAM Precision Level I rifle course at FTW Ranch in Texas, as well as a head-to-toe sheep hunting ensemble from Sitka Gear, Kenetrek Boots, Mystery Ranch backpacks and an optics package from MINOX USA. All of these fantastic drawing prizes were fully donated to WSF by the sponsors, who, with their generous support, are ensuring that a new generation of mountain hunters enters the WSF and wild sheep conservation ranks.

The WSF annual convention, The Sheep Show, is the premier mountain hunting and conservation convention in the world and will return under one roof in 2013 to the Grand Sierra Resort and Casino in Reno, Nevada.

An exceptional show with a friendly family atmosphere, The Sheep Show is attended by dedicated hunters and conservationists from around the globe. Sheep hunters are a rare breed—they hunt hard, hunt ethically, and go to the extremes in their quest and chase. With the finest outfitters and guides from the high mountains of North America, the South Pacific, Europe, and Asia, to the high plains of Africa, the Wild Sheep Foundation convention is the one to attend. Join them in Reno January 30–February 2, 2013, to help put and keep sheep on the mountain. ■

### For More Information Find WSF at:

[www.wildsheepfoundation.org](http://www.wildsheepfoundation.org)  
[info@wildsheepfoundation.org](mailto:info@wildsheepfoundation.org)  
[Facebook.com/WildSheepFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/WildSheepFoundation)