

OREGON BIGHORN SHEEP LOSSES CONTINUE TO CLIMB

March 1996 - Biologist now estimate that 50 to 60 of the 80 bighorn sheep between Knight Creek and Jim Creek in the lower Hell's Canyon of Oregon may be dead as a result of a bacterial disease outbreak that began in January.

In addition, the disease appears to have infected bighorns on the west side of the Imnaha River, causing concern that the disease continues to spread.

"We've found carcasses or have radio-collars emitting a mortality signal on at least 20 bighorns," said Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife bighorn program leader, Don Whittaker.

The disease outbreak began in Washington in November. A team of biologists from Washington, Idaho, Oregon and the U.S. Forest Service worked cooperatively to capture 72 bighorns in the infected area for treatment and study. More than 80 bighorns died in the Washington outbreak. Of the 72 captured, 11 are still alive.

"We've tried a different approach with our outbreak," said Whittaker. "We decided to capture and treat sick animals in the field with drugs to boost their immunity." Biologists felt the approach would reduce high stress levels caused by capturing and relocating bighorns to a treatment facility.

This herd of bighorns is across the Imnaha River from another 130 bighorn sheep, or about one-fourth of the state's total bighorn population.

Bighorns were extinct in Oregon in the early part of the century. There are now more than 3,000 Rocky Mountain and California bighorn sheep in Oregon thanks to reintroduction efforts funded by hunters.

— Oregon Dept. of Fish & Wildlife

LEGACY OF AMERICAN HUNTER REMAINS STRONG CULTURAL ICON

DENVER — The face of the American hunter is changing, but the legacy remains strong, according to a three-year national study of hunting trends funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In fact, the face of the typical American hunter is slightly less likely to be male, according to "Factors Related to Hunting and Fishing Participation in the United States," co-written by Steve Bissell of the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The study, believed by the researchers to be the most extensive ever completed on hunting trends, showed widespread support of hunting across the nation but slightly declining numbers of male hunters.

"They're actually dropping out for the same reason they started — the family," said Bissell. "The relationship between fathers and sons has changed — fathers now are more likely to be involved with their son's soccer league."

The future may bring an overall declining percentage of male hunters per capita, but that doesn't mean hunting will lose stature in American culture, said Bissell, who conducted focus groups with both hunters and non-hunters for the study. "Even among the nonhunting focus groups there is strong support — this is part of being an American."

Eighty-one percent of Americans support the continuation of legal hunting, and that support has been consistent through almost three decades.

"These numbers go to the 1970s — consistently 75 to 80 percent of the public supports hunting," Bissell said. "It's an extremely unique cultural heritage we're talking about — kids in England or Germany just don't expect to be able to go hunting or fishing."

The percentage of the total population that hunts has remained fairly stable — 10.2 percent in 1980, 9 percent in 1985 and 9.3 percent in 1990. However, that relative stability is mostly due to increased numbers of women who hunt.

Hunting among American males from 1980 to 1990 fell from 19.5 percent to 16.4 percent — a 16 percent decline from the 1980-based percentage. The percentage of females who hunt more than doubled between 1985 and 1990; from 1.3 percent to 2.7 percent.

The old adage, "it takes a hunter to make a hunter," turns out to be true, and the study found most hunters began before the age of 20 and were introduced to the sport by a father or father figure.

Anti-hunting sentiment was found to not be a factor in men giving up hunting. However, a loss of "social support" was a key factor for men giving up hunting.

"Hunters hunt with other hunters. As hunting partners move away, pass away, or become involved with other activities, participation by others in the group decline as well," the study notes. "This also happens when an avid hunter moves to a new area. Hunting activity often does not resume because the hunter does not have the social support system he used to have."

Another outcome of the study is that more and more hunters cite the experience of hunting, rather than bagging game, as the reason they hunt. And the survey also highly rated state wildlife agencies for their efforts in making hunting opportunities available.

The Division should look on the results as strong support of family and youth hunting programs, Bissell said, but it should also not ignore the obvious: That support of hunting does not only come from hunters alone.

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