

What's Wrong With Game-Farming Non-native Mountain Goats in Wilderness? By Jeff Smith

Earlier this summer the U.S. Forest Service published an environmental assessment (EA) on the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources' (UDWR) proposal to land helicopters 60 times to capture and collar mountain goats and bighorn sheep in three Wildernesses. The National Environmental Policy Act requires this assessment, which is meant to be an honest examination of the proposal's environmental impacts.

Utah wildlife biologists are worried about the failure of transplanted mountain goats to thrive in their new home, 53,000 acres of wilderness on the Wasatch Front, with Salt Lake City to the west and seven major ski areas immediately east. They want to build sustaining populations large enough to permit more hunting in the Twin Peak, Lone Peak, and Mount Timpanogos Wildernesses.

Several months ago, Utah requested permission to capture mountain goats, but because they aren't native it was virtually impossible to show the project was necessary to benefit the Wildernesses. It now appears UDWR is piggybacking bighorn sheep onto the project to make it appear it might help a native species. Even if capturing bighorns could be justified, roughly two-thirds of their range lies outside the Wilderness and they could be captured there.



*Collared mountain goat by Tom Driggers via Flickr.
Bighorn sheep capture by James Marvin Phelps via Flickr.*

If Utah is concerned about a decline in the mountain goat population, it should stop hunting them and undertake a habitat analysis to assess whether the non-native goats have run their course.

Wilderness Watch has closely tracked the project, commenting on two different "scoping" letters. Last month, we filed a 21-page comment letter calling the project "antithetical to the preservation of wilderness."

"Net-Gunning" 20 Goats and 10 Bighorns

Utah's management plans describe mountain goats and bighorn sheep as "once-in-a-lifetime species" for hunters. Mountain goats are not native, and all individuals in Utah stem from introductions that began in 1967. There were six transplants on the Wasatch Front, 42 goats over 50 years, and biologists hoped to build a population of 125 animals.

But the goats had different ideas. The population peaked at 65 in 2007 and has since declined to around 35 animals.

These goats know a good thing when they see one and rarely leave Wilderness. In 2015, for instance, biologists sighted goats 164 times, but they observed them only eight times outside Wilderness boundaries.

So, this fall, the state wants to fly helicopters where the goats find "optimal habitat." A UDWR team would spend two to four days in designated Wilderness, capturing 20 mountain goats and 10

bighorns. The team would "net-gun" the animals from the air, and land to "process" the animals, taking blood samples and fitting them with radio collars. The ground team would then free the animals, and the helicopter would land again to pick up the team to move to the next capture.

In this part of Utah, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, and domestic sheep live "sympatrically," sharing the broad geography and perhaps the *mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*

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bacterium, a respiratory pathogen. At times, the bighorns intersect with domestic sheep, which the Forest Service permits to graze in the nearby national forest. The spread of pneumonia from domestic to wild sheep is a significant problem in Utah and almost wiped out a whole herd of bighorns in the Deseret Peak Wilderness. At other times, the bighorns intersect with the mountain goats in the alpine meadows.

There is no mention of adjusting grazing permits for the domestic sheep in the EA, which would seem a logical first step in helping to increase the population. Instead, the agency wants helicopters landing in Wilderness and blood samples to confirm strains of pneumonia crossing between the three species. Animal collars are meant to provide better data on migrations. Biologists also want a more precise understanding of the causes of death, and they want to discover which of the three species acts as disease vector.

Standing Up for Wilderness

In our comment letter, Wilderness Watch's attorney, Dana Johnson, builds a powerful rebuttal to the UDWR's case. Repeated and intensive helicopter intrusions and radio-collaring, she writes, "violate the very core of the Wilderness Act." Moreover, the Forest Service's EA narrows the choice to one "fore-ordained formality" that fails to "rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives".

The irony here is that, while it's a very positive thing that UDWR recognizes federal Wilderness as "optimal habitat" for goats, the state agency sees no problem degrading Wilderness to achieve its research goal: as Johnson paraphrases it, "to investigate possible population declines of an introduced species managed by the State primarily for recreational sport hunting opportunities."

The Forest Service has a memorandum of understanding with UDWR to allow wildlife research on the lands it manages, but that must change at the Wilderness boundary. Congress intended—and the courts have reinforced—that the Forest Service not let state agencies weaken its authority over Wilderness.

Wilderness Watch's concerns also include:

- Federal managers can only allow exceptions like helicopters and net-gunning in Wilderness if such actions are necessary to preserve the wilderness character. The "under-performance of bighorn sheep and mountain goats in the Wasatch" is not a necessity to jettison the Wilderness Act.
- The Forest Service uses an artifice not found in the Wilderness Act—"the five qualities of wilderness"—to dilute wilderness standards to allow UDWR's project. The agency declares goats "natural", one of the five qualities, and therefore surmises protecting and propagating this quality overcomes the general prohibition on aircraft, motor vehicles and installations. The Act is a triumph of plain language: It prohibits machines and wildlife manipulations.

- Allowing helicopters for this project would make the Wilderness Act's prohibition against machines meaningless. With this precedent, the agencies "could approve helicopter-assisted research any time the data obtained might help a state agency better understand wildlife population dynamics."
- The Forest Service uses one unconfirmed report from 1918 to imply that mountain goats are in the Wasatch Range. But the Forest Service's own documents state mountain goats were introduced to Utah for trophy hunting.
- The Forest Service ignores studies suggesting that helicopters adversely affect bighorn sheep and mountain goats. The project could exacerbate population declines.
- The National Environmental Policy Act requires the Forest Service to "[r]igorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives" to a proposed action. In other cases the courts have ruled that the agency must "weigh the relevant factors" in their assessments. The agency, in a wily, deeply flawed EA, often artfully avoids the essential questions. Have hunters killed too many? Has forage quality declined since the goats were first transplanted 50 years ago? How do disturbances such as hunters, hikers, and low-flying aircraft already affect the herd? Are there protective measures to shield the goats and bighorns from domestic livestock diseases? Could samples from animals killed by hunters provide answers on pneumonia strains? Could biologists in the field using old-fashioned shoe leather, binoculars, and notebooks gather the migration and mortality data to preclude the use of radio collars? We don't know. We can't answer any of these questions because, in this EA, "the evaluation of other potentially detrimental impacts" is "outside the scope of this analysis."
- The amount and seriousness of environmental impacts necessitates that the Forest Service deny authorization for the proposed project or fully explore the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts in a full-blown environmental impact statement.

The Next Steps

The UDWR originally wanted to fly helicopters in either September or November this year, but the Forest Service decision-making may delay that schedule.

The Forest Service will issue a "proposed decision" sometime in the near future. Wilderness Watch will then have 30 days to "object" if we so choose. The agency will then analyze our objections and those brought by others and announce a final decision. At that point Wilderness Watch and our potential allies will determine whether to move our concerns to federal court. 🐾

Jeff Smith is the membership/development director for Wilderness Watch and wishes he could still carry as big a pack as he did when he first came to Montana in 1974. He moonlights as the co-chair of 350 Montana, an all-volunteer climate activist group.