

Historic Bighorn Sheep Disease Outbreaks in Western North America and Mountain Sheep Extirpation from Oregon

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Abstract: Bighorn sheep were abundant in Western North America prior to settlement. The common reported reasons for population declines and extinctions were unrestricted hunting, overgrazing by livestock and disease. Disease outbreaks decimating bighorn sheep herds were reported in the Tarryall/Kenosha Colorado herd as early as 1885. Montana reported die offs in the Southern Rocky Mountain front between the 1920's and 1930's.

In Oregon, bighorns were extirpated from Central and Eastern Oregon by the 1920's, in all but the Wallowa Mountains. A state wildlife refuge was established in the Wallowa Mountains to protect the small bighorn herd, however large numbers of domestic sheep were allowed to graze the same area. Between 1911 and 1920, over 10,000 sheep grazed the Standley Allotment alone. Field notes from Oregon State College Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit technicians conducting surveys in 1939 and 1941 found no evidence of surviving bighorns. Charles Seeber spent summers in the Wallowa Mountains from 1887 to 1946. He reported that "mountain sheep used to be very numerous in the area (the Wallowa Mountains) until domestic sheep were brought in."

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