



Catalina Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction Project March 3 -16, 2014

LAMBS

Biologists have observed two of the known lambs and their mothers using various areas of the Bighorn Sheep Management Area. As lambing is the most critical stage in the life cycle, and lamb survival can be as low as 20-25%, there are trail restrictions in place inside the Bighorn Sheep Management Area to minimize any negative impacts from human disturbance on the sheep. Both trailhead notices and volunteers on the trail have been reminding hikers of the potential adverse impacts to the sheep caused by dogs or by people hiking more than 400 feet off-trail within the bighorn sheep recovery area during lambing season. For additional information, please visit the U.S. Forest Service webpage at www.fs.usda.gov/coronado/.

BRIEFING

The following is a summary of Catalina Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction activities on the Coronado National Forest. This project status update covers the period from March 3-16, 2014. For project background and previously-reported information on project events, please see the earlier project status updates available at: www.azgfd.gov/catalinabighorn.

Additional project information can be obtained by visiting the Arizona Game and Fish Department Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/azgafd#!/CatalinaBighorns>, the Arizona Game and Fish Department webpage at <http://www.azgfd.gov/catalinabighorn>, the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society webpage at <http://www.adbss.org> or by visiting the Catalina Bighorn Advisory Committee webpage at <http://www.catalinabighornrestoration.org/>. This update is a public document and information in it can be used for any purpose.

TO SUBSCRIBE

If you would like to receive project updates as they are published please send your email to jsacco@azgfd.gov.

CURRENT POPULATION STATUS

The original release of 31 sheep consisted of 21 adult females or ewes, three yearling/juvenile ewes, five adult males or rams, and two yearling/juvenile rams. Thirty of the released sheep were outfitted with satellite GPS collars to provide managers with up-to-date information to help make adaptive, data-driven decisions. As of March 2, 2014, 14 of the 30 collared sheep were known to be alive on the mountains.

To date there have been sixteen bighorn sheep mortalities. Fourteen of the sheep were killed by mountain lions, one died as the result of predation by an unidentified cat such as a small mountain lion or a bobcat, and another died from myopathy. To date, three of the predating lions have been removed,

with the most recent removal being a lion that is believed to have killed multiple sheep. To follow are the details of each mortality, the result of the investigation, and management actions. Additionally, the habitat evaluation map showing corresponding block numbers for the project area is included below (see Figure 1).

On March 16, 2014 an adult ewe (ID #42) was found in Habitat Block 29 (fair). This area is characterized by mesquite desert grassland with fair visibility. Investigators determined that the sheep had been killed by a mountain lion. Pursuit of the lion had been initiated but no lion was caught.

On March 4, 2014, an adult ram (ID #58) was found in Habitat Block 50 (fair). This area is characterized by steep bluffs and slopes with fair visibility and difficult accessibility. Investigators determined that the ram had been killed by a mountain lion. Pursuit was initiated and lasted throughout the day; however, due to the risks to human life associated with working the rugged terrain, efforts to locate the lion were unsuccessful.

On March 3, 2014 an adult female (ID #37) was found in Habitat Block 30 (fair). This area is characterized by steep rugged slopes and cliffs with fair visibility. Investigation of the mortality site revealed predation by mountain lion as the cause of death. This sheep was part of a cohesive group that consistently used this area. After the predation event occurred, biologists noted that the group fragmented and subsequently used other areas of the range. The predator management protocol was implemented and the lion was removed within a few hundred yards of the predation event. The lion was a 7-9 year old male. Based on the lion's track size, the timing and location of the sheep mortality, and the timing and locations of other sheep mortalities, we believe that this lion was responsible for preying on 3 other sheep. This removal highlights the project Predator Management Plan, which was designed to be as specific as possible and remove only those lions that prey upon sheep. This discriminate methodology is used to limit negative impacts to the lion population in this area. The Predator Management Plan functions partly under the assumption that resident lions that do not eat sheep should retain their territories rather than be removed indiscriminately. Because they maintain and defend territories, their presence should reduce the influx of other lions that may or may not prey upon sheep.

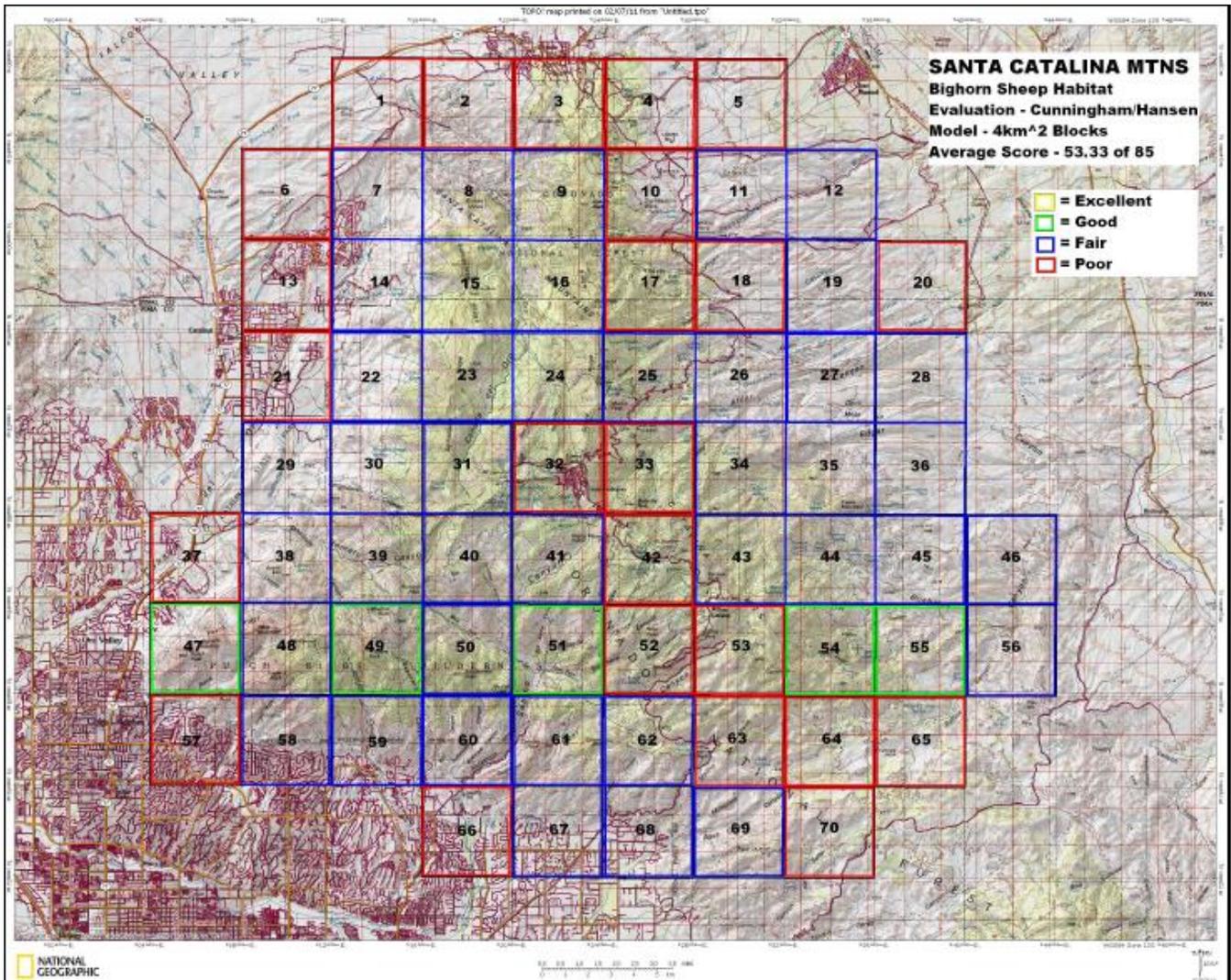


Figure 1. Cunningham Hansen Habitat Evaluation Map.

COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

The next written briefing will be provided on April 4, 2014.

PROJECT PERSONNEL

Mark Hart is the Public Information Officer for this project and can be reached at (520) 628-5376.

RESEARCH PROJECT FIELD NOTES

Research biologists continue to monitor both individuals and small bands of sheep to observe and document ewes with lambs, changes in group dynamics, and sheep movements and behaviors. The lambs we have observed on the Santa Catalina Mountains appear to be healthy and are growing quickly.

OTHER REMARKS

How many bighorn sheep mortalities can be sustained before the project would be curtailed?

This tipping point is under constant evaluation and has yet to be determined. It would also be dependent on the circumstances and locations of the mortalities as well as the corresponding remaining chances for the success of the project. This reintroduction effort has been designed around an adaptive management approach—meaning that instead of sticking to an initial plan no matter what happens, ongoing analysis of events and conditions will inform future management actions. It may be that under some circumstances, relatively few sheep losses will be cause for ending the effort; it may also be that under different circumstances, relatively high losses in the first or second year will not jeopardize successful restoration or be cause for ending the project.