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PLAQUES TO STAY IN EVENT SPECIES IS REINTRODUCED

Catalina bighorns are gone, but explanatory signs live on

Doug Kreutz Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, February 2, 2010 12:00 am |

DOUG KREUTZ / ARIZONA DAILY STARHiker

Signs at two popular trailheads north of Tucson tout a small herd of bighorn sheep in the Catalina Mountains - and they list hiking restrictions to protect the animals.

Only one problem: The herd apparently has died out.

The signs and restrictions remain, but they apply to what might be described as "phantom bighorns."

"The Catalina population of bighorns is gone," said Jim Heffelfinger, a spokesman for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. "I haven't had any good reports of sheep from the herd up there for seven or eight years."

Heffelfinger said that means the resident herd - which once numbered more than 100 bighorns in the Pusch Ridge area on the southwestern side of the Catalinas - no longer exists. It's still possible that people might spot "transient" bighorns from other ranges from time to time.

A recent reported sighting involved a sheep with a yellow ear tag, Heffelfinger said. That indicates the animal might have been a transient from mountains near Superior, where bighorns have been fitted with yellow tags.

Heffelfinger said likely reasons for the demise of the Catalina herd include:

- Extensive urbanization around the base of Pusch Ridge, with streets and buildings taking over terrain ever nearer bighorn habitat.
- Hikers - especially hikers with dogs - who disturb sheep and "have a slow, pervasive influence on survival and reproduction."
- Heavy growth of brush, a result of former fire suppression policies, that makes bighorns vulnerable to predators such as mountain lions.

"The sheep didn't disappear all of a sudden," Heffelfinger said. "We just saw less and less and less over the years." He said what turned out to be the last survey of bighorns in the Catalinas, conducted in 1997, found only one animal. So what about those signs at the Finger Rock Canyon trailhead, at the northern end of Alvernon Way, and the Pima Canyon trailhead, on Magee Road east of First Avenue?

The signs state that "the bighorn herd in Pusch Ridge Wilderness represents the last remnant of herds" that once roamed several mountain ranges around Tucson.

"The Pusch Ridge herd is now in serious jeopardy," the signs say. "Less than 20 bighorns survive in the area." Such information would appear to be misleading, at best, if nothing is left of the herd. Is it time to take down the signs and drop regulations that prohibit dogs and limit off-trail hiking?

Not yet, say officials of the Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Forest Service.

Heffelfinger and Forest Service spokeswoman Heidi Schewel said one reason for leaving the signs in place is that there's at least some chance that bighorns might be reintroduced into the Catalinas.

"We've been in discussions with Arizona Game and Fish about Pusch Ridge being a possible site" for transplanting bighorns from other parts of the state, Schewel said. "Leaving the signs and restrictions in place seemed like a good idea, given that there might be a reintroduction."

But a reintroduction wouldn't happen anytime soon, Heffelfinger said, because sufficient source populations from other sites aren't available now.

"And if they became available three or four years down the way, the Catalinas probably wouldn't be the first place we put sheep," Heffelfinger said. That's because transplanted animals would face the same conditions that apparently led to the demise of the original herd.

Heffelfinger acknowledged that leaving the inaccurate signs up indefinitely might not be a good idea.

"After a while, it becomes kind of meaningless," he said.

Meanwhile, tourist David Tzeuschler, preparing to take a walk on the Pima Canyon Trail last week with his 3-year-old son, Timothy, chose to take a hopeful approach.

"Maybe we'll see a bighorn," he said to Timothy as the two started up the trail.

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Did you know

A herd of 50 to 75 bighorn sheep survives in the Silver Bell Mountains, northwest of Tucson, according to the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Source:

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