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# Desert Bighorn Sheep in the Cave Creek Area

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REINTRODUCTION POSSIBLE INTO THE DESERT FOOTHILLS

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Desert bighorn sheep [*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*] are magnificent animals that symbolize the grandeur and wildness of the mountains rising above the Sonoran and Mohave Desert basins. The wildness and isolation of these mountains enabled desert bighorn sheep to survive the arrival and effects of historic settlers and their livestock. In many areas they were hunted to local extinction and in other areas they were killed off by exotic livestock diseases they had no natural immunity against. Nevertheless the bighorn sheep held on in mountain ranges excessively dry or too isolated for domestic livestock operations to be profitably pursued.



Today desert bighorn are found in southern New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah and northern Mexico including the states of Sonora and Baja California. Bighorn sheep numbers are stable now and so they are hunted. The mountains around Cave Creek-Carefree, Arizona once supported desert bighorn sheep. One newspaper account describes the harvest of two sheep in 1892.

### **“Killed Two Big Horns”**

*George Webb is reaching out after the belt as the champion of Arizona. Not content with destroying about all the deer and bear in the hills, he went out in Cave Creek country two days ago and killed two fine mountain sheep. Now he feels proud, for but few hunters ever see a bighorn, and still fewer have ever bagged one. And he brought in the heads as witness of the story. The game is extremely scarce, even in the wildest mountain regions of Arizona, and their shyness saves the genus from extinction.*

*Arizona Daily Star*, November 22, 1892

Even in 1892 desert bighorn sheep were scarce in Arizona. So rare that the territorial legislature closed the season on desert bighorn sheep and not until the 1950s was the season open again.

The presence of desert bighorn sheep as late as 1892 is surprising because of the large number of cattle and sheep free-ranging the countryside at that time and the ever increasing number of settlers looking for free meat to eat in the area. Diseases such as scabies, hoof-and-mouth and brain worm devastated the bighorn sheep population throughout the West. Fortunately many mountain ranges in western Arizona and eastern California were too dry for cattle and sheep so the desert bighorn sheep living there were not exposed to the same levels as the sheep in more mesic<sup>1</sup> ranges where domestic livestock could be raised. One notable exception was the Kofa Mountains north of Yuma. Here cattle and bighorn sheep coexisted. Today the cattle are gone and the bighorn sheep are thriving to such an

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia: *having a moderate or well-balanced supply of moisture*



extent that sheep from the Kofas are often translocated to mountain ranges where sheep are locally extinct or where the population has declined for some reason.

Settlers were not the first people to hunt desert bighorn sheep in the Cave Creek-Carefree area. The people we call the Hohokam were attracted to these animals. Not only do we find bighorn sheep remains, i.e., bones in Hohokam sites, we find petroglyph depictions of bighorn sheep as well as other animals on stones throughout the Cave Creek-Carefree area.

Located about 12 miles from Cave Creek town hall is the Hohokam site known as the Palo Verde Ruin (ca. A.D. 1020 -1070). Archaeologist Mark Hackbarth reported in 2000 that several bighorn sheep horn cores were uncovered either on floors or within the roof fall of several Hohokam houses.

Bighorn sheep horn cores have been found in other Hohokam sites throughout southern Arizona in ceremonial context. Many modern Tohono O'odham people consider bighorn sheep horn cores sacred.

Ancient desert bighorn sheep images are found carved into stone as petroglyphs, as stone effigies, molded out of clay as figurines and painted on the surface of pottery and boulders as pictoglyphs. The importance of bighorn sheep was noteworthy to the ancient people of this area.

Today desert bighorn sheep are found in the Tonto National Forest west of Bartlett Lake northeast of Scottsdale, AZ. There is no reason why they cannot return to the Desert Foothills area north of the Towns of Cave Creek and Carefree, Arizona. Bordering on the north is the expansive Tonto National Forest, the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area, the more southerly Cave Creek Regional Park and the several Desert Foothills Land Trust preserves, more than enough land and habitat to support a population of desert bighorn sheep.

On 2 May 2005, the Cave Creek town council passed a resolution authorizing the town to work with the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Tonto National Forest and the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society to reintroduce desert bighorn sheep back to the country north of Cave Creek. Hopefully, in the not too distant future, we will see this magnificent animal gracing the mountains to the north.

