Sacificial Ram

Alberta’s trophy-hunt auctions have raised millions to support wildlife research the province no longer funds.

By Sid Marty
**Very Tall**. Alberta’s little band of national park wardens and provincial conservation officers joins forces in a cat-and-mouse game with a dedicated band of bighorn sheep hunters. The wardens and officers try to uphold the law, while the hunters try to get a legal trophy. The game goes on today much as it did in the 1970s, when I was a warden in Jasper National Park. But the stakes are higher, because the value of a world-class bighorn ram to collectors has risen from around $50,000 a few decades ago to about a million bucks today. You don’t have to be a Freudian to analyze this obsession with big horns.

I am a hunter. Not a trophy hunter, but one grateful for the chance to provide my family with healthy wild meats, free of penicillin and growth hormones. Trophy hunting, once the sport of aristocrats, is something entirely different. Teddy Roosevelt, a Massachusetts boy who climbed the ranks to become President of the United States, was a great hunter. He was able to provide my family with healthy wild meats, free of penicillin and growth hormones. He also enjoyed trophy hunting, once the sport of aristocrats, is something entirely different.

Teddy Roosevelt, for one, popularized the sport merely by participating in it. Anyone, of course, can pursue a trophy sheep, but it takes big money to find the best. The obsession with ram trophy hunting, once the sport of aristocrats, is something entirely different. Teddy Roosevelt, for one, popularized the sport merely by participating in it. Anyone, of course, can pursue a trophy sheep, but it takes big money to find the best. The obsession with ram trophy hunting, once the sport of aristocrats, is something entirely different.

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Spreads Eagle Mountain greets the prairie steppe without a screen of high foothills, the kind that are otherwise common along most of the Rocky Mountains’ East Slope in Alberta. Cliffs of green and red mudstone rise to the summit bastion topped with erie castellations and gendarmes of stone. Blind Canyon cleaves the rocky southern wing of the peak, a great gap guarded by two high ridges, its bottom lined with aspens and old hay meadows.

Such dry basins, covered with tough blends of fescue grasses and sedge and exposed to chinook winds that clear away the snows every winter, made this the prime North American habitat for bighorn sheep and trophy rams until 1982, when an epidemic of disease, probably introduced by a strain of pasteurella virus in domestic sheep in British Columbia, decimated the population.

The remaining sheep are protected today thanks to the efforts of conservation groups led by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, composed mainly of hunter-conservationists, whose purchase 65 hectares here for $134,000 and set it aside as wildlife habitat in 1995. This money came from the annual auctioning of two Minister’s Hunt permits, one for elk and one for bighorn, granted to the foundation since 1995 to raise funds for wildlife in Alberta. Held annually at hunting conventions in Reno, Nev., and other American cities, the auctions have raised $2.8 million for wildlife research and set up conservation easements. In southern Alberta alone, it has secured hundreds of hectares of private property as wildlife habitat.

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Another charitable entity, the Alberta Conservation Association, the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep and Shell Canada, soliciting private funds to carry out a public responsibility. Meanwhile, thanks to political pressure from hunters, the hunting continues.

Mike Cardinal, the Alberta Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, was unavailable for comment on his government’s policies. Instead, I was invited to speak with Ken Ambrock, the acting assistant deputy minister in charge of wildlife management. A former biologist, Ambrock is the type of media-wise executive who governs a government department on heavily these days because, with his wary, professorial manner, he can make what the layman sees as crazy organization changes seem normal, even inevitable. He sits on the board of the Alberta Conservation Association but maintains that he has no special influence to help government biologists obtain funding over other applicants.

“The reality is that budgets have declined,” Ambrock says. “We have to rely on other organizations to do the research to support the management strategy for any species.”

Or, put another way, government biologists should probably give up on the idea of doing research and let their colleagues take over. Society as a whole would benefit if they advise them on how to manage publicly owned wildlife. In other words, let the wolves look after the sheep.

Let us consider a metaphor in a circle of stones. Colonized with lichens and half-buried by time, it lies in a patch of bearberry at the foot of Victoria Peak. The Blackfoot call it a medicine wheel, but its specific purpose is lost to annuity. It is a circle made out of delinquents, of land use by hunter-gatherers, these few stones are all that remains. I stand inside the wheel and contemplate the scan from one industrial century. Per-
a flood of hunters the following season. It got so you could hardly find a ram. The sheep don’t mind that. You’d see young rams, and then next year, there’d be no legal ones."

Today’s more-sensitized Shell Canada has closed the main road into this and other drainages, which at least protects the nursery herds from truck hunters, if not from dirt bikers.

Brian Horesji, a tall, curly-haired outdoorsman, is an independent wildlife biologist and government critic. He re-searched bighorn herds at the Sheep River Wildlife Sanctuary west of Alberta’s Turner Valley, then worked on the conservation of numerous wildlife species. Now he studies grizzly bear and bighorn conservation issues for the Crown-Castle Wilderness Coalition.

"Despite all the efforts we’ve put into sheep management and recovery, we still don’t have land-use standards or thresholds for sheep country in Alberta," says Horesji. "We’ve never come to grips with the real issue, which is what I call ecological overload. Where do we set the line on what we can do in and around sheep country!"

"Here in the southwest, the government keeps saying put more [industry] in; if you’ve got an idea, we’ll accommodate it. But standards should be based on biological thresholds that relate wildlife-population viability to levels of land use that can’t be exceeded. These popularizations are down to little patches that have lost some of their genetic variance. So when we look at a sheep, it looks like the same sheep it was in 1850 or 1900, but it’s the product of land-use practices and collapse of the sheep country of Jasper National Park but find no sheep. We see few and over Fiddle Pass on a 30-kilometre trip into the back-country of Jasper National Park but find no sheep. We see few active sheep trails at the head of the Fiddle.

Next day, I take a seat in biologist Beth MacCallum’s truck to see sheep that prefer coal mines to national parks. At the foot of the Nikanassin Range, separated by the valley of the Gregg River, are the Gregg River and Luscar open-pit mines. The mine sites cover 7,272 hectares, of which 1,600 have been mined over the last 33 years. About half of the mined area has been reclaimed and planted with a mix of domestic and native grasses and legumes. In recent years, miners have come out of the Cadomin Wildlife Management Unit more than any other in the province. Not surprisingly, the biggest rams taken during the Minister’s Hunt have been from this area, and all of them spend at least part of the year foraging for food on mine leases.

The best wild-sheep habitat in Alberta is threaded by wide roadways driven by huge ore trucks, a moonscape that looks as though a glacier had recently retreated after denuding the forests. Steep ridges of grassy sheep habitat are bisected at points where the mines form cliffs that fall away into deep pits which once held pods of coal 40 metres thick. Mineralized waters seeping from the exposures first attracted bighorn to the mine lands. The cliffs are vital to sheep in escaping predators, and MacCallum has found that they seldom venture more than 300 metres from such escape terrain.

Not only has sheep behaviour been altered, but the physical development of at least one population has been artificially enhanced. The biggest rams no longer come from the south. The biggest and best now range farther north, near Cadomin. To find out what the best bighorn habitat in Alberta looks like these days and what it might look like in the future, I drive north to Hinton, then along the mountain front to meet outfitter Larry Chapman. We ride on homestead up a creek and over Fiddle Pass on a 30-kilometre trip into the back-country of Jasper National Park but find no sheep. We see few active sheep trails at the head of the Fiddle.

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T A L E O F T H E B L I N D C A N Y O N T R O P H Y

F R E D W E I L L E R was not out to set any records on that autumn day in 1911. He tied up his horses in the forest partway up Spread Eagle Mountain in southwestern Alberta, then continued on foot where the slopes are dangerously slick with kinnikinnik draped on wet rock. He was packing his Model 1894 Winchester 30-30, a sharpshooter by necessity, carrying only a few precious bullets in his magazine.

Sport had little to do with it, according to local historian Don Brestler. Weiller had attempted to burn down the abandoned office and wind up in the possession of his foreman, Clarence Baird. When Baird moved to another location, vandals attempted to burn down the abandoned ranchhouse and threw the ram’s head out into the mud, where it was rescued by Baird’s wife, then cleaned up by another taxidermist.

Not until 1964 did members of the Willow Valley Trophy Club convince Baird to send the head to the Boone and Crockett Club, then in Pittsburgh, Pa., to be officially measured. He feared the ram would be lost in transit, but reluctantly acquiesced. In fact, it was temporarily lost during a railroad strike, but it eventually turned up again in a Buffalo warehouse, resumed its journey, and was officially scored at 208 1/8 points. (Points are calculated from the length of the horns plus their circumference measurements in three places, with one point awarded for each inch. Fractions are recorded in eighths.)

In 1971, the Baird home was consumed by fire, and the ram trophy destroyed. Fred Weiller died in 1936, never knowing the Blind Canyon ram was a world record. In 1911, the Baird homestead was consumed by fire, and the ram trophy destroyed. Fred Weiller died in 1936, never knowing the Blind Canyon ram was a world record.
pared with 1,700 on nearby wild mountain slopes. In winter, sheep paw the snow aside to feed on grasses. It is no wonder that the sheep down south in Blind Canyon country no longer compete with these heavy-set lunkers, whose population expands as new habitat is seeded for reclamation.

These sheep also have become habituated to workers and mining activity, as well as to the absence of hunters, since no hunting is permitted. Walking through the lease on the mine’s Gregg River Headwaters Trail, I could approach to within 20 metres of some groups of rams that were bedded down and chewing the cud before they rose to their feet.

Are these wild sheep at all? Or are they living on a kind of game farm without fences? Is this really what Albertans want to see when they think of wild mountain sheep?

If some of the sheep have changed their habits, there are hunters who have changed to match them. Tom Vinson gazes into the past and tells me of 21-day hunts back in the 1950s that were a test of men and horses.

“It was always tough,” says Vinson. “I used to tell all the hunters I booked that they would never get a ram easy, and I never did get one easy.” The clients then may have been mainly big-city professionals, but “they were real outdoorsmen.” Vinson’s son, Tom Jr., bought his father’s outfit when he retired. Outfitters nowadays attend sporting club meetings in places like Reno to find their clients. “When Tom tells them they have to ride a couple of days just to get into camp,” Vinson says. “Some of ’em just turn and walk away.”

Hunting season around the mine boundaries is a sad spectacle, according to one local guide. When the regular season opens in late August, he told me, resident hunters are lined up around the boundary “like fence posts” waiting for a ram to come out. The season for these hunters ends at the end of October.

The Minister’s Hunt begins in early November, when the annual rut is under way. Rams are particularly vulnerable at this time, so distracted by the rut that you can “grab ’em by the balls as they walk right by you,” as one hunter put it. Only two hunters are allowed around the mines in November: the successful purchaser of the minister’s permit and the winner of a raffle held for resident hunters.

When I asked assistant deputy minister Ambrock to comment on the ethics of the Minister’s Hunt, the question gave him pause. “Moral and ethical issues are hard to deal with,” he ventured. “We are producing lots of sheep on the mine; certainly the herd can be sustained while having a hunt there.” But is it really a fair chase? Ambrock declined comment.

The Caprinae Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, which includes experts on the ecology, taxonomy and conservation of wild Caprinae (sheep, goats, muskox, etc.), supports special trophy hunts as a way of generating funds for conservation of mountain ungulates, but opposes “artificial feeding to increase horn growth” and “hunting privileges not allowed to other hunters, such as … special hunting seasons during the rut.”
Once the hunt begins, hunters travel either on foot or by horseback around the mine property and adjacent terrain, trying to intercept rams coming in from the mountains to the rutting ground. Or they wait in ambush on the slopes above the leases for selected rams to venture beyond the lease boundary. There is no need for outdoor hardships at night, since accommodation is available in Cadomin. Minister's Hunt permit holders usually show up on the mine property in late summer, as Sherwin Scott of Phoenix did in August 1998 with a personal taxidermist in tow. Armed with cameras and scouting for the largest rams, Scott saw the biggest bighorn of his life — “It would score from 210 to 214 points,” he says. He intended to claim it.

Scott, who paid $405,000 (U.S.) for the 1998 permit, is a complex man. A real estate developer, philanthropist and

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big-game hunter, he made news with his bequest of $1.8 million (U.S.) to endow a chair in philosophy at the University of Arizona. He sums up his obsession with trophy rams this way: “Hunting is as natural as it is for a mother to protect her child. It is a primordial instinct, a need that most men have.”

The big ram Scott had seen in August didn’t return to the lease in early November. Five days into the hunt, a fine-looking ram approaching from Jasper National Park stood within 80 metres of Scott. His guides urged him to shoot, but he declined. There was only one ram he wanted. Scott returned home unsuccessful but undeterred, then spent $330,000 (U.S.) to obtain a Minister’s Hunt permit the following year.

“People have difficulty understanding why I would spend so much money just to get an animal like this,” says Scott. “What they find harder to understand is why I would not take that shot. They feel with that kind of investment, you’ve got to take something.”

Scott is a persuasive talker who expresses concern about the public’s perception of hunting. “I won’t tolerate unethical hunting,” he says. Scott sits on the Weatherby Foundation committee that presents an annual award to the world’s top hunter. “We can’t afford to have people doing things that aren’t ethical. I’m very sensitive to the scrutiny. I like to give the animal all the advantage I can.”

I mention my concern about the vulnerability of rams during the rut. “I’ve thought about these issues a lot,” Scott says. “I wouldn’t argue the point.” It is, after all, the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division that sets the rules, not the hunter.

In 1999, Scott pegged a large ram heading toward the lease with its head full of lust. It was touted unofficially at the time as being worthy of scoring number four on the Boone and Crockett list. It must have been a huge relief to all concerned, but it was not the great ram that Scott had seen. He suspects that one was poached.

**WORLD-RECORD-HOLDER**

Guinn Crousen seems to be steered by humbler stars. The resident of Dallas, Tex., has bid on and won the special permit three times and intends to come back for one more hunt in 2002. Does he hope to beat his own world record?

“That’s not it,” he rumbles through the phone in a hound-dog Southern drawl. “Y’all got to understand the person I am. I grew up poor. Dad was in the military, not at a very high rank either. We didn’t have much. But my dad loved to hunt and fish, and I grew up in the love of hunting and fishing.

“Now I’m not married, I’m nearly 60, got no kids. I have built and established a successful business. Everybody has a cause in life. I grew up loving the outdoors. There is nothing better than going to the top of a sheep mountain. The view up there, the fresh smell of the air — that’s an adrenaline rush for me.

I sit back, listening to Crousen’s tale, and through my own open window, only a kilometre from the nearest sheep mountain, I can almost smell that perfume of bog birch and willow leaves on a wet fall afternoon. But sheep on my mountain are few in numbers these days. It is Nov. 28, 2000, and just before dusk slides down the slopes where Crousen waits on Luscar Mountain. He can see the ram he wants on the reclaimed mine flats below. It is cold, and his aging knees ache from 18 days of hiking and riding, but at last, he has the prize in sight. He watches as some coyotes trot down onto the mine lease. They startle a ewe, which runs up toward the ridge top. The big ram comes after her, intent on cutting her off.

Now is the time to honour the gods of fiscal conservatism. Ask not whose hand is on the trigger: let complicity be our pole star. Let us take this cold weapon, this .270 Weatherby Magnum, and crouch in the snow on this ridge, the mountain wind whistling among the dwarf firs, watching the big ram angling across the ledges below.

Here he comes, oblivious to danger, up past the white signs, stepping across the boundary line.

“He’s our … take him!” the outfitter urges. The ram looms in the sights. It is a going-away shot at 50 metres, no contest.

A breath, exhale, squeeze the trigger, and the old world record has fallen. Crousen has the grand slam he has sought for 12 years.

There on the rocks, the big ram is dead, his massive horns stained with coal dust. The sacrifice has been made.

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