

# How the government tried to prevent bighorns from being killed on desert road

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A herd of beloved desert bighorn sheep was seeing its numbers reduced in fatal accidents with automobiles driven by people on a paved desert road. All of the accidents were happening in exactly the same short section of roadway where the sheep crossed between two small mountain ranges where they lived.

Local residents implored local politicians to fix the problem. So the politicians huddled with the bureaucratic scientists in charge of managing the sheep. Since these people weren't from the immediate area and didn't have on-the-ground experience to make their decisions they held some public hearings, ignored the input, and then hurriedly came up with a solution and scraped together funding to protect the iconic animal.

The solution was a blinking stop light in the middle of the desert on the rural road. It would make the speeding traffic slow down and stop in the critical area where the sheep deaths occurred. The solution seemed to work. During the first two months the light was in place not a single sheep was struck on the roadway.

No one complained initially, but soon local residents and desert travelers who passed through the area grew frustrated with stopping in the middle of the desert for no apparent reason. There was no intersection and the "Bighorn Crossing" sign didn't seem to make much sense when people never saw bighorns. It wasn't long before everyone was just blowing through the light, hardly slowing down.

Sure enough, another sheep was whacked and killed, and then another.

Of course, there was outrage from the people concerned about the bighorns. So, the politicians and scientists huddled together again, and came up with a more restrictive solution. They put in regular stoplight. It stayed solid red for five minutes at a time, and then turned green for only 30 second at the time to clear traffic. On weekends and when work travel peaked, the traffic was backed up behind the light for a half-mile or more.

Once again, people simply started blowing through the light once they realized there was no reason for a light in the middle of the desert. And once again, a bighorn was thwacked.

This time the political response was quicker and supported by the scientists. They outfitted the light with a traffic camera and each vehicle that blew through received a citation. Revenue piled up, but then word got out about the citations and people stopped running the light.

First, a few trucks ducked out of line and simply drove through the desert adjacent to the roadway and around the light. After just a few days, the dirt road around the light became well-worn and people who knew about the bypass simply slowed and went around the light while other waited at the light.

The area, however, became so congested with traffic – people backed up behind the light and others slowing and taking the dirt bypass -- that the sheep would often mill around the area looking for an opportunity to cross the road and dart between the vehicles on the dirt bypass.

It didn't take long for the sheep to just stop using the spot.

This, too, concerned the sheep lovers and they called their politicians and scientists were consulted again.

One of the lead scientists, not wanting to get out of his cubicle, called a rancher and desert sheep enthusiast who lived in the area and had attended the public meetings on how best to protect the sheep. The scientist asked the old rancher who had studied the bighorn herd his whole life what had happened to the sheep. Had they all



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been killed on the roadway, he worried? The old rancher laughed. He said all the commotion created by the stop light, bypass road, and a Highway Patrol officer sitting there all hours of the day, had disturbed the sheep. The rancher said the animals moved about a quarter of a mile further along the ridge. At this spot a bridge had been built over a deep canyon that cut through the two mountain ranges the sheep used. Instead of crossing the road, the sheep had simply started going into the canyon and under the roadway where it was safe and there was no commotion.

“So we solved the problem,” gloated the scientist.

“Well,” said the rancher. “If you remember, I suggested that we build a game-proof fence that would direct the sheep to this canyon in the first place, fencing them off the road where they were getting killed. It would have saved a lot of time and money – and sheep.

As it is, some sheep are still going to get hit on the road,” said the rancher.

“Wait, more sheep are going to get hit?” asked the flustered scientist.

“It’s inevitable. Some will still try to cross the road, especially in the fall and winter when the males are running back and forth across that area looking for ewes in heat,” said the cowboy. “You have to alter the sheep’s movement pattern – not try to add more restrictions to people driving the road. The fence is still the best solution.”

“We will close the road,” said the scientist. “That would completely end the problem.”

The old rancher hung up the phone.

**[Note: This fictionalized account is *not* about the COVID-19 virus.]**

END