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## **ECOLOGY**

### **Analysis of Saddle Mountain Wildlife**

**Information covering Desert Bighorn Sheep return to Saddle Mountain.**

**Tonopah Area Coalition 2003**

The Federal Lands encompassing Saddle Mountain and Palo Verde Hills are a circular shaped region of BLM managed lands that range from rugged canyons and sheer cliffs at Saddle Mountain to washes with lush vegetation among the smaller Palo Verde Hills. The region consists of varied terrain and a mix of habitats.

Three washes (Delaney, Coyote, and Fourmile) converge with Winters Wash which bisects the Palo Verde Hills from north to south. The result is a relatively lush, oasis-like, environment of large and small plant materials which benefit a variety of wildlife (NRHP application).

Saddle Mountain is composed of creosote-bursage, Saguaro-Palo Verde, and mixed riparian scrub habitats which can support 163 species\*. Threatened species (1980's listing) within the area include Gila monster, kit fox, cooper hawk and sharp-shinned hawk. Additionally, prairie falcons and golden eagles are found in the upper reaches of Saddle Mountain (BLM -Upper Sonoran Wilderness EIS 1989). One federally listed and two candidate plant species also occur in the area. Naturalist Michael Plagen documented 58 wildflowers within the SM-PVH's area during a visit in March 2003.

Much of the mountain's shirt is in the Saddle Mountain Category II Desert Tortoise Habitat Area, "the area is high quality tortoise habitat with patchy but sometimes dense populations" (EA No. AZ 026-94-19). Greater protection, especially from surface disturbing activities like unconfined off-highway vehicle use would benefit this wildlife habitat.

Saddle Mountain provides important habitat for desert bighorn sheep and desert tortoise. Previous studies covering Saddle Mountain failed to identify the bighorn sheep population as a wildlife component of Saddle Mountain. The value of Saddle Mountain as critical bighorn sheep habitat is new information and was not considered in the previous BLM study.

**"The mountains contain active prairie falcon nest sites and recent golden eagle nest sites and therefore have certain wildlife significance"**

(Upper Sonoran WSA: RMP-EIS, BLM 1989)

Saddle Mountain's rugged terrain provides numerous values for bighorn sheep including escape terrain and lambing areas. The mountain's steep terrain is dotted with alcoves that protect young lambs from predators like coyotes. Isolated, steep slopes, also benefit mule deer and is a valuable aspect of the mountain's wildlife features.

Some believe that a lack of water can sometimes limit wildlife populations, but it is no longer a limiting factor at Saddle Mountain. In 1995, one of the mountain's four tinajas was developed into a 30,000 gallon storage tank thus assuring significant amounts of water for wildlife year around.

The Gene Bowdoin Tinaja Wildlife Water Development was part of a cooperative effort of over 100 volunteer members of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the BLM (Arizona Desert Digest 1996). This costly water development showed a strong commitment to preserving Saddle Mountain as viable habitat for desert bighorn sheep by a volunteer group and the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Yet water alone will not guarantee the survival of Saddle Mountain's bighorn sheep. They also need space to carry on their daily activities. "All the food and water they can use is of

little value to bighorn if they can not have enough space to satisfy these requirements in their own way” (Hansen 1980).

Bighorn sheep need a wide range of habitat so they can find varied foods and suitable areas for breeding. The population in this area needs both Saddle Mountain and the neighboring areas to the south to find that diversity. Interstate 10, Central Arizona Project, and large tracts of agricultural development have begun to isolate Saddle Mountain so it is critical that existing habitat connections to the north and south remain possible.

Bighorn migration from Woolsey Peak Wilderness Area through Saddle Mountain to the Eagletail Mountain Wilderness Area has been documented by radio collar data according to Arizona Game and Fish Department. The success of the desert bighorn sheep population in the Eagletails (located 16 miles west) is testimony to the value of Wilderness designation for protection of habitat valued by ungulates.

Preserving these tenuous linkages are seen as critical to long-term success of the desert bighorn sheep populations in this region.

**<In the twenty three years since the return of DBS at Saddle Mountain was confirmed the population has increased. Estimates of desert bighorn sheep vary significantly but have been as high as 40. The increase has been enough to allow desert bighorn sheep hunting at Saddle Mountain (Hunting Unit 41) and four have been moved to Buckeye Hills to help the group there.>**

**<The boundary outlined in the Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal makes the north side of Saddle Mountain a front country with easy access a many vehicle routes, picnic areas, and scenic cliffs and range. Backcountry lands will maintain the links for desert bighorn sheep from Saddle Mountain to Gila Mountains and the Eagletail Mountain range.>**

\*Bureau of Land Management - Upper Sonoran Wilderness EIS 1989.

Hansen 1980 - Hansen C.G. G. Monson, L. Sumner, 1980. The Desert Bighorn - Its Life History, Ecology, and Management. University of Arizona Press, Tucson Arizona.

NRHP Application - National Register of Historic Places.

Plagen M.J. 2003 Web site covering inventory of plants and birds at Saddle Mountain.  
[http://www.arizonensis.org/sonoran/places/saddle\\_mountain.html](http://www.arizonensis.org/sonoran/places/saddle_mountain.html)

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