



Q: Wanted to know how much science is behind the Bureau of Land Management’s contention that dogs accompanying hikers on the trails surrounding the Coachella Valley are contributing to diminishment of the population of bighorn sheep.

— **Guy Richardson**

“It’s about the dogs compromising the bighorn sheep’s overall fitness, and their ability to survive in the wild,” said Aimee Byard, associate director and biologist at the Palm Desert-based Bighorn Institute.

When a bighorn sheep encounters a dog on a trail, it could respond in two different ways, according to Byard. It could flee, potentially abandoning important resources like a long-awaited water or food source. Or, it could become “habituated” to dogs, ignoring them and staying instead of reacting, causing them to no longer have the proper reaction when actual predators come along, such as coyotes.

“Which is worse? It depends. If they’ve been waiting two hours to come and drink at a water source, and there’s limited water sources in the summer, and you just inadvertently bumped the sheep off of a water source, that can be pretty impactful to them. Versus, OK now they’re so used to animals that they’re not reacting appropriately or staying alert, and they’re dying from predation,” said Byard. “If they’re inundated with dogs on trails, they’re going to take their guard down and not react as a wild sheep should react, and then they could be eaten by coyotes.”

[Dogs are prohibited on most Bureau of Land Management lands in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument](#) to protect the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep. The prohibition is part of [the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan](#), which was approved in 2008. The plan is designed to conserve 240,000 acres and protect 27 plants and

animals, including the Peninsular bighorn sheep. But even before that plan, the Bureau of Land Management prohibited dogs on public lands in the Santa Rosa Mountains east of Palm Canyon in 2000.

[Palm Springs only recently installed signage and began enforcing the prohibition on the popular Museum Trail, South Lykken Trail, North Lykken Trail and Araby Trail in 2019](#), after updating city policies to be consistent with the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan.

Byard also noted humans should never try to pursue, touch, or feed bighorn sheep.

“If you're lucky enough to see them, enjoy it from a distance. You could sit down, you'll have a longer observation, give them their space, and be respectful,” she said.

If you're looking for somewhere else to hike with your dog, here are some options:

- Dogs on a leash [are allowed on the trails that connect Homme-Adams Park and Cahuilla Hills Park, as well as on the trail to the cross.](#)
- Leashed dogs are also allowed [at the Cove Oasis Trailhead area in La Quinta](#), but they are not allowed on these trails that extend south and east from the Cove Oasis Trail: Bear Creek Canyon Trail, Bear Creek Oasis Trail, and La Quinta Cove to Lake Cahuilla Trail.
- Dogs on a leash are allowed at all Wildlands Conservancy preserves. Locally, this includes the Mission Creek Preserve, Whitewater Preserve, and Pioneertown Mountains Preserve.
- Leashed dogs are allowed in San Bernardino National Forest, but are not allowed within the Mount San Jacinto State Park wilderness.

— Erin Rode, environment reporter