

Twenty years later: How Rancho Mirage's fence is protecting the local bighorn sheep herd

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The 1990s were a tough time for Peninsular bighorn sheep in Rancho Mirage. Drawn by lush green grass and water sources, sheep wandered down from the hills to Highway 111, where they faced threats from cars, poisonous pesticides and plants, and drowning in pools.

The Desert Sun described this “common sight” along Highway 111 in Rancho Mirage in 1999: “Groups of up to a dozen Peninsular bighorn sheep grazing quietly on emerald turf, while just a few feet away, traffic whizzed by at 55 mph or faster.”

At least 13 bighorn were hit by cars in Rancho Mirage in the 1990s, eight of them fatally. A study by Palm Desert nonprofit the Bighorn Institute around

that time found that 34% of collared adult bighorn deaths were urban-related, as well as 43% of collared lambs.

Today, the endangered bighorn sheep are no longer a common sight in Rancho Mirage neighborhoods, even as their numbers are growing.

These urban-related deaths mobilized the city that features a bighorn in its logo, and 20 years ago Rancho Mirage erected an 8-foot-tall, 4-mile fence to keep the sheep in their natural habitat. The fenceline now stretches for a total of 8 miles, after developers on either side of the city's fence were required to put up their own fencing.



The fence is viewed as a local success story for the Northern Santa Rosa herd that lives in the rocky hills that rise above Highway 111 in Rancho Mirage — there's only been one urban-related bighorn death in Rancho Mirage in the two decades since the fence was built. A lamb and its mother walked around the end of the fence a few years ago, and the lamb was then struck and killed by a car.

"The Rancho Mirage fence has been really effective in keeping the bighorn in their natural habitat and essentially preventing urban deaths in that area," California Department of Fish and Wildlife Erin Schaeffer said.

The species has been protected under the California Endangered Species Act since 1971, when it was first listed as "threatened," and was listed as federally endangered in 1998 following the population loss between the 1970s and 1990s.

Experts say more work is needed to protect the endangered species from the urban development creeping into their habitat, especially as the local bighorn population increases and nears a key benchmark for downlisting the species from endangered to threatened.

This includes the construction of a long-awaited similar fence in La Quinta, where bighorn currently graze on green golf courses, munch on potentially poisonous plants, and drink from swimming pools — a situation akin to Rancho Mirage 20 years ago.

An 'effective tool' for bighorn recovery

As a result of the Bighorn Institute's mortality studies in the 1990s, Rancho Mirage first banned oleander, a poisonous shrub, and then decided to build the fence after issues with bighorn sheep continued, according to city spokesperson Gabe Coddling.

"The bighorn fence is one the most remarkable accomplishments our great city has done in the spirit of wildlife conservation," said Rancho Mirage Mayor Pro Tem Richard Kite, who first served on the city council in 2000. "I'm so proud our community rallied together all those years ago with creative collaboration to save and protect this most magnificent animal."

The \$1.2 million fence was funded through a combination of city funds, a landscape assessment of nearby developments, wildlife agency funds and donations, according to Coddling.



Today, the chain link fence — painted a dusty brown to match the desert landscape — stretches from Magnesia Falls Drive up and around Sensei Porcupine Creek, passes Rancho Mirage Elementary School and heads down toward Highway 111 before curving outward again around Thunderbird Cove, then eventually comes to an end near the Mirada Estates.

Construction on the first phase of the fence began in 1999, and the fence was completed in 2002. There are a series of locked gates along the fence that can be used to herd a sheep back inside if it gets out. On one night in 2002, these gates were closed while the sheep were sleeping up in the hills, and the sheep

woke up to learn they'd been shut out of their daily commute down to Rancho Mirage neighborhoods.

“We went out the next morning, walking the fence, checking it, and all the sheep are standing right by the fence going ‘this is the worst day,’” said Aimee Byard, associate director and biologist at the Bighorn Institute.

It took about three weeks for the sheep to adjust and stop standing along the fence during the day, Byard says. That’s less of a common sight these days, as the bighorn have adapted to the barrier separating them from their former stomping grounds by venturing further into the backcountry, their original habitat before the herd was enticed by new development along the hillsides.



“They’ve expanded their habitat use and distribution they’re going back farther in the backcountry, now that they’re not down here daily. They’re using different areas more as they had in the past before all these Thunderbird pools were built, so (the fence) has been quite an effective tool for the recovery of this herd,” Byard said.

According to the Bighorn Institute, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the number of bighorn in the northern Santa Rosa herd near Rancho Mirage numbered about 65 in the early 1980s. By the 1990s, the population had dropped to the mid-20s, where it hovered for nearly a decade before reaching a population of about 40 adult bighorn sheep near the turn of the century, just before the fence was built. Today, there are over 100 sheep in the herd.

Bighorn Institute also released a total of 100 captive-reared bighorn sheep into the northern Santa Rosa Mountains between 1985 and 2016.

Over 800 bighorn counted in 2016

The improvement in the northern Santa Rosa herd mirrors a broader improvement in bighorn sheep population across their range. Peninsular bighorn sheep live in Southern California's desert ranges, including the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains, with a range that extends south into the mountains of Baja California in Mexico.

The range-wide population of Peninsular bighorn was estimated at 1,171 in 1974, before declining to less than 300 adult sheep by 1996. The decline in population is attributed to habitat fragmentation and loss from urban and commercial development, human disturbance, disease, prolonged drought, insufficient lambs, and predators.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife monitors bighorn population abundance, distribution, lambs, and causes of mortality through a combination of tracking collars, ground and aerial monitoring, and helicopter surveys. The last helicopter survey was in 2016, when the agency counted 884 individuals, with approximately 300 of those in the Coachella Valley region.

The species also met a key benchmark that year under [the 2000 Recovery Plan for Bighorn Sheep in Peninsular Ranges](#), which established criteria that must be met before the species is downlisted back to federally threatened status or

delisted entirely from a protected status. The sheep's range is split into nine recovery regions, four of which are either entirely or partially in the Coachella Valley: the San Jacinto Mountains, Northern Santa Rosa Mountains, Central Santa Rosa Mountains, and Southern Santa Rosa Mountains.

To be downlisted, there must be at least 25 ewes, or adult females, in each of the nine regions for a period of six consecutive years, a threshold that Schaeffer says was first met in 2016, making this year potentially the sixth consecutive year.

This has prompted talk of potentially downlisting the species from federally endangered to threatened, which some local environmental and conservation groups, including the Bighorn Institute, oppose at this time.

Part of the opposition stems from the fact that CDFW hasn't conducted a population survey since 2016, while they're supposed to occur every two years. The next helicopter survey is planned for later this fall.

Next federal review in 2026

But in addition to at least 25 ewes in each region, there's also a second criteria that must be met in order for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to downlist the species: "Regulatory mechanisms and land management commitments have been established that provide for long-term protection of Peninsular bighorn sheep" and their habitat.

"It's not as easy as just saying once you meet one criteria, they're going to be downlisted, there's a lot more to it, and the population has to be stable over multiple years," Schaeffer said.

One such mechanism is the long-awaited construction of the 9.5-mile La Quinta Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Fence. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sent a joint letter to the city of La Quinta and the Coachella Valley Conservation Commission in 2014,

mandating that they build a fence to keep bighorn sheep from grazing on La Quinta golf courses within two years.



Urban-related deaths have "really increased" in the past five to 10 years, according to Schaeffer, and the highest number of urban-related deaths occur in Recovery Region 3, which includes La Quinta.

The Bighorn Institute estimates that over 40 sheep have died from urban-related causes in La Quinta since that 2014 letter. Byard also says that the sheep gather in much larger groups in La Quinta than did in Rancho Mirage, which allows for the faster spread of disease.

"Until (the La Quinta area) addressed, it should not be downlisted ... How do you with good conscience think of downlisting an endangered species think of downlisting an endangered species when you have this area that's a detriment to their survival?," said Byard.

La Quinta met its portion of the mandate in 2016 when it agreed to install a 1.2-mile, 8-foot-high fence at SilverRock after an environmental group threatened a lawsuit which could have potentially held up resort development. The city paid just over \$506,000 for the fence and installation.



The Coachella Valley Conservation Commission approved plans for the remaining 8.3 miles of fence in 2019, but construction hasn't started yet. Construction will begin sometime in October, according to CVAG spokesperson Erica Felci.

While CDFW monitors the Peninsular bighorn population, it submits that information to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is responsible for determining whether the species should be downlisted from federally endangered to threatened.

"I would be cautious about getting super excited that we've met one of the criteria, because we really have to show progress on both criteria. And the second one in particular is going to take some analysis, it's not easily

quantifiable... But we're excited about the public support that we have for this species, and this is one that we think can be a great success story in the not too distant future," said Rollie White, Assistant Field Supervisor for the Palm Springs U.S. FWS office.

According to White, the recovery plan for the bighorn represents "the best guess we have at the time" of what a recovered species will look like, so it also is possible that the agency could determine the species should be downlisted without meeting those specific criteria, or vice versa.

There are generally two ways that the U.S. FWS could start the downlisting process of a federally endangered species. The first is if they receive a petition to downlist a species and find that the provides substantial information to warrant a review. The second method is through their regular five-year reviews of the species' status.

The last five-year review of the Peninsular bighorn was in 2021, and did not recommend initiating downlisting. The next review will be in 2026.