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## Good news for the desert's bighorn sheep, once near extinction

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There is little doubt that last year was a year to remember. Or perhaps forget.

While problems still abound, our national rhetoric now seems a shade lower than before. There is good news out there too, some little and some big, but these days you have to seek it out.

In this vein, I'm happy to report that our local bighorn sheep populations are holding their own.

Readers of this occasional column will recall that the Bighorn Institute of Palm Desert is our valley's gatekeeper when it comes to monitoring the health and welfare of our woolly neighbors. There are three herds along the southern rim of the Coachella Valley, all of which were bordering on extinction just a few decades ago.

Thanks to 35 years of monitoring, captive breeding, careful science, and advocacy, all three herds are on the road to recovery. There are no guarantees, but it looks like we will continue to see this iconic species in our foothills for some years to come.

Recent surveys by the Institute indicate there are now 71 adult bighorn in the San Jacinto mountain range behind Palm Springs. The count includes a few more females (ewes) and males (rams), plus a half dozen cute little lambs having emerged during the spring breeding season.

Bighorn normally give birth during the spring, but at least one ewe saw fit to wait until recently to have her young. Three mortalities have also been recorded since April, a sobering but not atypical number. Still and all, this herd appears to be healthy and growing.

Behind Rancho Mirage in the Northern Santa Rosa range there are some 91 sheep, again including more ewes than rams. Lamb survival here over the past year has been excellent, with about 20 furry juveniles still galloping around. Historically, only about one-quarter of

newborns make it to their first birthday so the numbers here have been especially encouraging.

It should be noted that the four-mile fence erected years ago separating sheep from humans in this area has been hugely effective. When such a fence is finally built along the southern rim of La Quinta, a project mandated by authorities back in 2014 but still not constructed, it should yield similar benefits.

In the meantime, sheep continue to assemble in large numbers on La Quinta's scenic fairways, coming down from the Central Santa Rosa mountains to feast on ornamental grass and foliage. Overall, there are about 120 sheep in this range, a respectable number, but preventable illness and mortality continue to concern biologists. Only 10 or so lambs seem to have survived the summer heat, dining as they do on the inviting and wholly exposed golf course flora.

In other news, July's waterhole count undertaken annually by Institute staff and volunteers resulted in the spotting of 65 individual sheep coming down the hills to drink. Bighorn can imbibe an astonishing amount of water at a single waterhole sessions, but summer temperatures still require them to make regular visits to re-hydrate.

While there weren't as many rams seen as the above population figures would suggest, this was not cause for alarm. The institute itself continues to maintain a small captive herd on its 300 acres as brood stock in the event of an unanticipated herd collapse.

All monitoring and science are continuing as usual, and the institute's annual fundraiser is once again approaching next month. If your interest runs to the natural world and the type of fauna that surrounds us here in the beautiful desert, supporters and volunteers are always welcome.

For more information, visit [BighornInstitute.org](http://BighornInstitute.org).

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