

Urban pressures on the desert bighorns

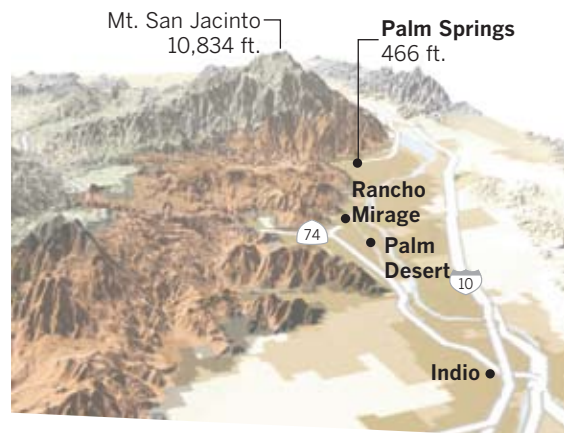
Endangered peninsular bighorn sheep are struggling to survive above the Coachella Valley. The captive breeding program at the Bighorn Institute has added to bighorn numbers, helping prevent their extinction. Habitat loss is the immediate threat to the northern herds, but high predation rates and disease have plagued all sheep in the range.

Habitat and urbanization

Peninsular bighorns have suffered as development encroaches on their range in the foothills above the Coachella Valley.

■ Critical habitat
 ■ Urban areas
 ■ Public lands

Low-elevation bighorn: from 400 feet to 4,600 feet



Urbanization threats

- Loss of connectivity between groups
- Toxic plants (oleander)
- Parasites
- Traffic accidents
- Herbicides
- Pesticides
- Predation from urban coyotes
- Behavioral habituation
- Sheep abandoning areas frequented by humans and dogs.
- Loss of lower elevation grazing areas in spring

Natural predators

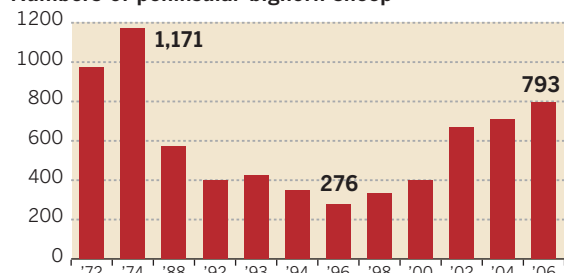


- Coyotes primarily prey on lambs.
- Gray foxes and bobcats can take lambs, too.
- Mountain lions pose a greater threat in Anza-Borrego than the northern ranges.

The rangewide count

The bighorn population reached a low of 276 in 1996, and the species was listed as endangered in 1998.

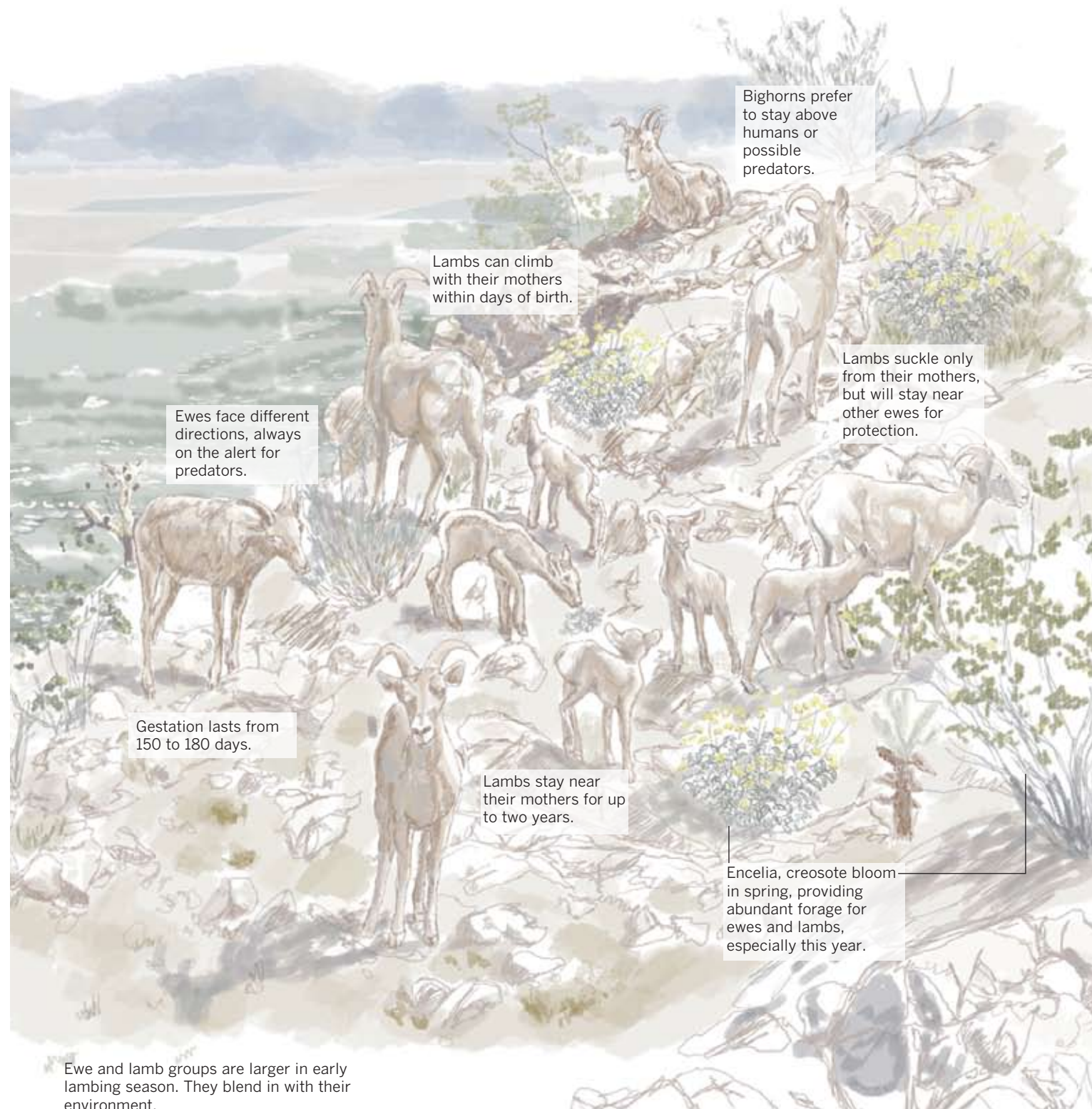
Numbers of peninsular bighorn sheep*



*Before 1994, population estimates were obtained sporadically. Starting in 1994, helicopter surveys were done every other year.

The lambing season

January through June is when bighorn ewes give birth to lambs and form large groups for protection from predators. Although each lamb will suckle only from its mother, all lambs will mingle with other ewes to learn survival skills.



Bighorns prefer to stay above humans or possible predators.

Lambs can climb with their mothers within days of birth.

Lambs suckle only from their mothers, but will stay near other ewes for protection.

Ewes face different directions, always on the alert for predators.

Gestation lasts from 150 to 180 days.

Lambs stay near their mothers for up to two years.

Encelia, creosote bloom in spring, providing abundant forage for ewes and lambs, especially this year.

Ewe and lamb groups are larger in early lambing season. They blend in with their environment.