

Excerpt below from:

Rightful Heritage: Franklin D Roosevelt and The Land of America
by Douglas G. Brinkley

“Roosevelt in 1936 turned to the crisis of the desert bighorn sheep, a species struggling to survive in the deserts stretching from West Texas and Mexico to California, Nevada, and Utah. Admired by Native Americans and lovers of nature alike throughout the West, desert bighorns ranged in color from chocolate brown to tan to beige. Only the males, however, boasted the magnificently curled horns. As “charismatic” North American species went, these sheep were in the same league as grizzlies, manatees, and mountain lions. The cliff-dwelling sheep had long managed to survive in the remote landscapes of the Southwest after arriving via the Bering Land Bridge about 300,000 years ago. When Thomas Jefferson negotiated the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, there were around two million bighorns in North America. But a ruinous combination of factors—diseases introduced by domestic livestock, habitat loss to agricultural concerns, the fouling of water sources by humans, and excessive hunting—had caused their numbers to decrease to a mere seven hundred animals. Of the four recognized varieties of North American sheep, the desert bighorn was in the greatest peril. Two of the Roosevelt family’s favorite wildlife conservationists—William Temple Hornaday and Charles Sheldon—had each written convincingly about the need to save the desert bighorn sheep. Harold Ickes informed the president in 1936 that these wild sheep had vanished from Washington, Oregon, Texas, North Dakota, South Dakota, and parts of Mexico; their only remaining strongholds were in Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. The desert bighorns’ dwindling numbers had also led to social disruption and aberrant behavior within those herds that managed to survive. Queried about what to do, Ickes warned that if the Southwest’s desert bighorns weren’t given huge reserves, they would perish as a North American species. Taking a cue from Theodore Roosevelt’s conservationism, FDR wanted to establish a large-acreage desert bighorn preserve in the Southwest. Senator Key Pittman of Nevada—a leader at the recent Washington wildlife conference—believed that an isolated swath of desert wilderness, just twenty miles north of Las Vegas, would make a mighty preserve for these keen-eyed, surefooted big-game animals. The rugged mountains of the Desert Game Range, as it would eventually be designated, were characterized by red rocks, steep cliffs, canyons, mesas, natural arches, and bottomlands. In autumn, rams often engaged in dramatic confrontations, facing each other, charging at full speed, and then slamming together. Most Americans at the time viewed southern Nevada, where the Desert Game Range was located, as an arid ecosystem largely uninhabitable for humans. A small number of homesteaders, cowpokes, rogue miners, gold prospectors, and horse wranglers were able to withstand the blistering summer heat in hopes of striking it rich. It was common in mid-1930s Nevada to see road signs announcing city populations of 7 or 18 or 39. But Ralph and Florence Welles, a married couple employed by the Park Service, were environmentalists completely at home in the wild tangle of desert ridges and canyons. Together they wandered the loose-rock gulches, rust-tinged mesas, and canyonlands of Nevada to study desert bighorn sheep. The Welleses gathered a wealth of information about the sheep, publishing articles about springtime lambing seasons, horn-locking duels, and foraging habits. They helped convince Harold Ickes and Ira Gabrielson that the ledge-loving animal embodied the “wild spirit” of the American West and needed federal protection from overhunting and reckless ranching activities. Because of Nevada’s powerful Senate delegation—Key Pittman and Pat McCarran—federal appropriations poured into the state. More than

thirty-one thousand young men, many from Arkansas and Missouri, were assigned to CCC camps in Nevada. While most of the serious work was aimed at devising flood control strategies or establishing military outposts, Roosevelt wanted Nevada's state parks and wildlife refuges to flourish as well. Working in conjunction with the Division of Grazing, the CCC developed mountain springs with underground storage tanks and troughs. While they were sold to Nevadans as a way to help ranchers tend cattle, these water facilities also doubled as key measures in the saving of desert bighorn sheep. On May 20, 1936, the president established a Desert Game Range of more than 1.5 million acres by Executive Order 7373. This act protected not only desert bighorns but also vast swaths of the Mojave and Great Basin ecosystems. A few years later, Roosevelt added a 320-acre parcel at Corn Creek to serve as the range's administrative headquarters. 95 (Eighty years after its creation, the Desert National Wildlife Refuge would remain the largest refuge in the "lower forty-eight.") The range was to be jointly run by Interior and Agriculture. Pack mules were used by biologists to spread feed for the bighorns during drought. When FDR acted with foresight in 1936, there were only three hundred bighorn sheep left in Nevada; thanks to this executive action, they numbered 1,700 by 1939. Six years after Desert National Range was established a passenger plane carrying Hollywood star Carole Lombard crashed into mountains at the refuge. The Biological Survey's best, most surefooted mule, "Madam Sweeney," was pressed into service to find the wreckage. Lombard was found dead. "Madam Sweeney" brought the body down to an overwrought Clark Gable, the late actress's husband. Visitors to the Desert National Range immediately made the mule a celebrity and a tourist attraction equal to the rams.

— Rightful Heritage: The Renewal of America by Douglas G. Brinkley

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