

A Brief History of Mountain Goat Management at Olympic National Park

In July 2017 Olympic National Park released its *Mountain Goat Management Plan* draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The draft plan, released in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), proposes to remove non-native mountain goats from the Park and Olympic National Forest through a combination of live capture and relocation and authorized shooting. If implemented, these actions will resolve a more than 40-year-long management controversy at Olympic, a controversy in which OPA has been involved intently.

The story began innocently enough, when a dozen goats were introduced to the Olympic Mountains by hunting interests between 1925 and 1929. That was before the area became a park, and wildlife was being swapped willy-nilly around the West.

Goat numbers remained small and localized for several decades. But by the early 1970s OPA trustee Dr. Harry Lydiard reported increasing goat damage to alpine plant communities to Park managers. Studies ensued and by the 1980s the population topped 1,000. Resource destruction from browsing, trampling and wallowing became severe. Experimental live capture and removals reduced the population by 400 goats in the mid-'80s, and a census in 1990 revealed a population of about 400 animals remaining. Mountain goats are notoriously difficult to count, however, and population estimates were rough.

A 1994 draft management plan quantified damage to alpine vegetation and soils and proposed to remove remaining non-native goats by aerial shooting. Animal rights activists mounted a nationwide protest and Congressman Norm Dicks, who represented the area, weighed in. To the disappointment of conservationists, the plan was dropped.

By 2005 mountain goats began to repopulate Klahhane Ridge and other areas—after nearly a two-decade absence. Klahhane goats began to acclimate to people. Between 2007 and 2008, they became aggressive, leading to the tragic death of Bob Boardman by goat attack in 2010.

A survey conducted in 2011 indicated goat numbers were increasing at five percent annually. But a census taken in 2016 resulted in a population estimate of 623—an eight percent annual increase from 2004. The "trend line" was heading steeply toward 700 and 1000, close to where we were in the 1980s at the height of alpine degradation.

Scoping for a renewed mountain goat management plan began in 2011. Public meetings were held and sample alternatives were circulated to the public. The major difference between the current plan and the 1994 effort is that Olympic National Forest and WDFW are participating in the effort. Goats will be removed from the Forest as well and WDFW will transport them to suitable habitats in the North Cascades, where native mountain goat populations have failed to recover from overhunting on Forest Service lands.

The draft plan offers four alternatives: no action; live capture and relocation; lethal removal; and a combination of live capture and lethal removal. This last option, Alternative D, is the Park's preferred alternative, and is supported by OPA. If implemented, federal agencies will contract out live capture by helicopter, and transport and relocation will be handled by WDFW. There will be two two-week capture periods per year. Most animals will be captured in the first two to three years, followed by shooting from helicopters and from rangers and certified volunteers on the ground for another two years. Ongoing maintenance will be required. The goal under that alternative is total removal of non-native goats.

Public meetings are scheduled and comments on the plan are invited through September 26, 2017. Please see the OPA home page for details. Implementation funding has been secured, and if planning proceeds on schedule, a final plan and EIS will be released later this year. Implementation could begin in the summer of 2018.

OPA looks forward finally to resolving this long-standing resource and human safety threat to the Park's and Forest's alpine areas.