



THE "EL VIZCAINO" BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The Reserve straddles the Baja Peninsula. It is an interesting area that truly is where the desert meets the sea. Within this 10,000 square mile protected area are: the endangered peninsular pronghorn antelope; the primary birthing area for the Gray whale; one of the world's largest salt producing facilities; some amazing pre-historic cave murals; volcanoes; geothermal electric plants - and bighorn sheep.

The Biosphere was first formally surveyed by helicopter in 1996 and a large number of animals were observed. Through great efforts, the federal government authorized 4 permits for the Biosphere that year.

The revenue from these permits is placed into a fideicomiso, essentially a bank trust. A technical committee was established to review the proposals - for wildlife conservation projects or for social development projects in the local community - and allocate the funds.

The funds are used for a variety of projects and programs. They are used to conduct regular wildlife patrols and establish guard stations. Physical barriers to traffic were built to reduce access to poachers. The wildlife habitat was evaluated and the condition monitored; and some improvements (such as water developments and domestic grazing modifications) were made.

In addition, the people who worked in the hunting camps (the cooks, cleaners, guides, outfitters, wranglers, etc.) are all from the local community. "Eco-guardians" were hired to patrol the areas and to help ensure the safety and the food/water resources for the wildlife.

As the conservation measures are put into place, the number of bighorn sheep in the Biosphere continue to increase. Helicopter surveys have classified larger numbers of sheep and increased numbers of rams. These surveys, paid by the trust fund, are conducted to evaluate the age and sex structure of the population and recommend the number of permits to be authorized. The age and scores of the rams harvested have also increased through time - showing the conservative nature of the harvest strategy,

Why is Bighorn Sheep Hunting in Baja California so Special?

In the 1970s, as many as 113 permits were issued annually for Baja California. From 1980/81 to 1989/90, a total of 605 permits was issued (ranging from 30 to 73 permits annually). Hunt success averaged 82%. Nearly 60% of the hunters were Mexican nationals; while 40% of the permits were used by foreigners. Reviewing the 15th edition of the Safari Club International record book; of those rams scoring between 170 and 180 points, 46 came from Baja California and 21 came from everywhere else. Of those rams scoring between 180 and 190 points, 17 came from Baja California and 2 came from everywhere else. Of those rams scoring greater than 190 points, 3 came from Baja California and 0 came from everywhere else.

Frequently asked questions

Can I take somebody with me - like a guide? Many hunters develop a relationship with a guide so that they trust them and would like to have them accompany them on hunts. This has been common on the hunts in Mexico, and your Mexican guides recognize this relationship and accept it. Do remember that some of the local guides you'll have in Mexico have been on over 100 desert bighorn sheep hunts. Additional non-hunters can join you for a relatively small fee.

How is the water and the food? At the base camp the food is ample and quite good. Due to logistics, at the spike camps the food can be more meager. It is always a good idea to have in your pack some of your favorite snacks. The water is bottled and has never caused any problems with previous hunters.

What permits do I need? You need a firearms permit and a CITES permit. The firearms permit will be checked upon entering Mexico * and you MUST have it. The CITES permit will be checked upon your return to the US with your trophy - and you MUST have it.

What do I do about tipping? The hunt that you have purchased is an expensive item and you will be provided with very good service. You should tip accordingly. You can simplify the matter by providing the tip to the camp manager with the directions to share it appropriately. If someone gave you exceptional service you can provide something directly to them. Sometime hunters will leave some of their hunting equipment with the camp. Things that are easy to get in the US may be hard to obtain in Santa Rosalia and are appreciated.

What can I expect for a sheep? Harvest success depends upon physical capacities, skill, and always some luck. Looking at recent scores, if you see a 170-point ram - shoot it! The hunt is for a 10-day period.



Photo Credit: Stew Stone

Equipment

You should take all of the things that you would normally take on an outfitted hunt - personal items, good optics, etc. The area where you will be hunting is comprised primarily of lava and almost all of the plants have thorns. You should ensure that you have a very good pair of boots and leather gloves. It will likely rain at some time. A good sleeping bag with a flannel insert will allow you to modify your bedding as appropriate for the weather. You should also take any special snack food or beverage items that you prefer.

The base camps are relatively well equipped. The spike camps are much less so. Food at the base camps is usually well prepared by the cooks and quite ample. Food at the spike camps can be a little more meager. Remember, you are on a sheep hunt!

Awards

One way to measure the quality of the rams harvested is to review the Wild Sheep Foundation's Ram Awards Program. Since 2000, the "El Vizcaino" Biosphere Reserve has produced the following winners:

- 2000 - Honorable Mention (172 2/8)
- 2001 - Honorable Mention (174 2/8)
- 2004 - Honorable Mention (174 5/8)
Honorable Mention (168 3/8)
- 2005 - Silver Medal (181 7/8)
- 2006 - Silver Medal (183 6/8)
Honorable Mention (175 0/8)
Honorable Mention (174 0/8)
- 2007 - Honorable Mention (168 1/8)

How to get there

The airport of entry for the Biosphere hunt is Loreto in Baja California Sur. Alaska Airlines (and its codeshare partners) fly from Las Angeles to Loreto * but not daily. From the airport it is about a 3-hour drive to the base camp.

We'll work with you to make your hunt a rewarding experience!

Since 1996, over 80 permits have been auctioned for Tiburon Island, Sonora, and for the "El Vizcaino" Biosphere Reserve and Carmen Island, Baja California Sur. These permits have generated over \$6,000,000. The local communities derive jobs, and a source of self-respect, from these programs. Bighorn sheep are now the principal source of income in some communities.

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Brief History of Bighorn Sheep Hunting In Mexico

Bighorn sheep have existed in Mexico for more than 10,000 years. Although pre-settlement numbers were large, the population declined in the face of subsistence hunting, and the various diseases contracted from domestic livestock. Bighorn sheep

numbers declined to the point that bighorn sheep hunting was closed in 1922.

A series of experimental hunts started in 1964. The first regular hunting season for bighorn sheep was authorized in 1969. Seasons continued under various regulations and administrations. In 1990, hunting in Baja California was again closed due to a lack of knowledge of bighorn sheep numbers. In 1992, following Mexico's participation in the Convention in Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), all bighorn sheep hunting in Mexico was suspended because there was not enough biological information to justify the issuance of permits.

To better determine bighorn sheep distribution and management opportunities, standardized helicopter surveys were initiated in 1992. Hunting was reopened in Baja California Sur and Sonora in 1995.

Brief History of Land and Wildlife Management in Mexico

In Mexico, while a region may be designated as a "protected area," it can also be overlaid by other land ownership claims. Land ownership is a serious issue, as this was one of the prime causes of the Mexican Revolution. Peons had lived in virtual serfdom due to the land tenure laws. One form of land ownership, common in bighorn sheep ranges, is a communal system termed ejidos; here land is held in common by the various ejiditarios.

In 1997, Mexico initiated a new wildlife conservation program. This led to the development of the System of Units for the Conservation, Management, and Sustainable Development of Wildlife (SUMA). The basic unit of this system was the development management unit (UMA). Each UMA must have a resource management plan and a technician to monitor the natural resources. Hunting permits are authorized under the UMA system to the landowners.

Until recently, particularly for bighorn sheep, nearly all wildlife management authority rested with the federal government in Mexico City. Now management authority has been ceded to individual state wildlife management agencies.



Photo Credit: Stew Stone