

Heritage and Habitat

The Bighorn Youth Academy features one of the area's most mesmerizing—and endangered—species.



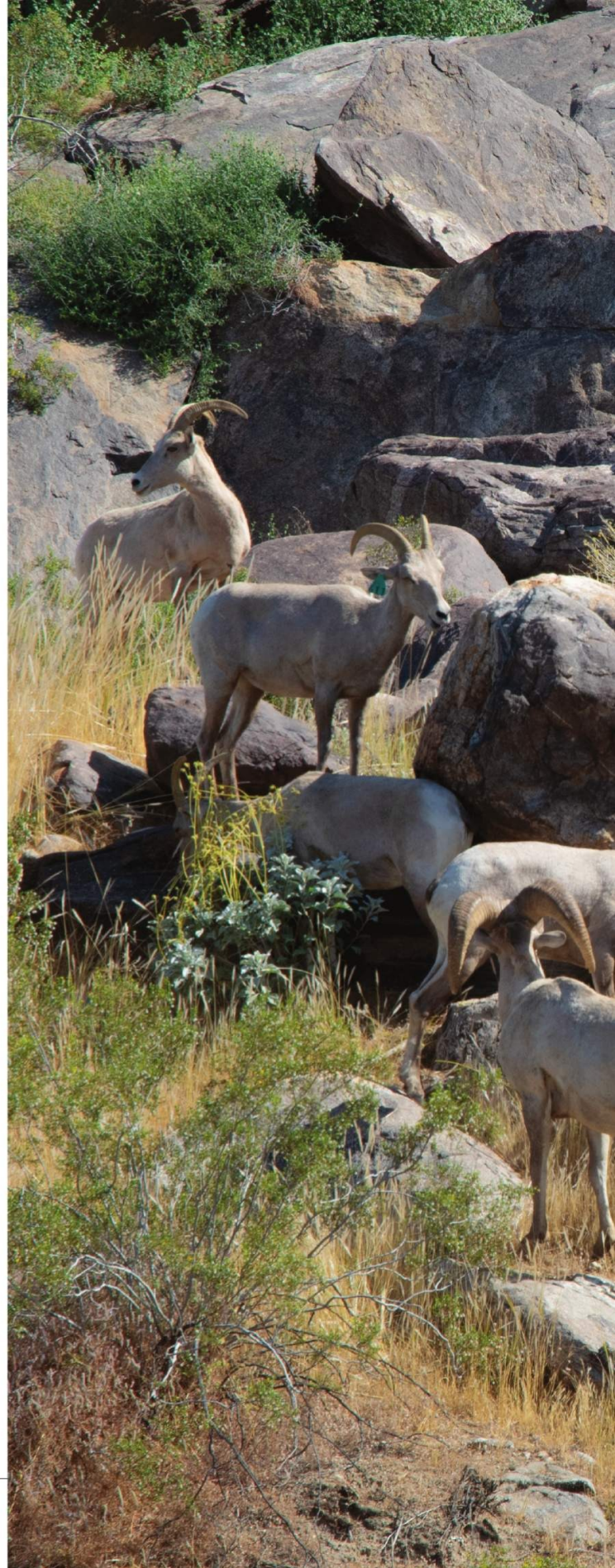
EVERY NOW and then, visitors exploring the Indian Canyons or Tahquitz Canyon find themselves stopped in their tracks, mesmerized by a magnificent-looking creature with massive curled horns and piercing, wide-set eyes that has suddenly appeared along the steep edge of a cliffside: the Peninsular desert bighorn sheep.

What should you do if you're ever fortunate enough to spot one? "Just enjoy the view from afar," says Katarina Waszak, Environmental Planner for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. "It's important to remember that these are wild animals, and you do not want to get close or try to pet them," she explains in a new

video presentation for the first-ever Bighorn Youth Academy put on in conjunction with the Agua Caliente Youth Group Committee.

The youth academy was recently launched by the Tribe to help the attendees learn more about these beautiful animals, whose numbers began to drastically decline in the 1970s due to a variety of factors such as human disturbance, habitat loss, predation, and disease. By 1998, the Peninsular bighorn were placed on the federal endangered species list, resulting in the development of a recovery plan aimed to guide the recovery of the population.

With the Peninsular bighorn sheep's habitat encompassing



KATE ANDERSON, JUSTIN POLIZZI

Peninsular bighorn sheep live in the San Jacinto Mountains, which encompass a portion of Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, as well as the Santa Rosa Mountains to the south and all the way down to Baja California and Mexico.





more than 20,000 acres of Agua Caliente Indian Reservation land (including the Indian Canyons and Tahquitz Canyon), the Tribe has long been proactive about protecting the species and has become even more deeply involved in conservation efforts over the last decade, partnering with agencies like the California Department of Fish & Wildlife and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to implement the Bighorn Sheep Recovery Plan. This plan focuses solely on collecting data and making environmental changes that will help the populations grow, and ultimately get them removed from the endangered species list.

How they collect the data is one of several subjects Waszak covers in the Bighorn Youth Academy. Attendees learn, for instance, about GPS/VHF tracking collars and how each emits a unique frequency, like a radio signal, so that the Tribe and its partners can easily

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monitor a sheep's movement with an antenna and receiver. This enables them to better understand their habitat use, seasonal and daily movements, where they give birth, causes of mortality, and other long-term trends.

Information gleaned from this data helps the Tribe establish rules for visitors to its parks, including limiting hiking between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., so as not to scare sheep from their water sources; encouraging guests to stay on trails, thereby minimizing disturbance to areas where they feed or give birth; and prohibiting dogs, which Waszak explains can be seen as predators to sheep.

Though significant progress has been made, continued efforts from the Tribe and its partners—as well as all of us who explore the bighorn sheep's habitat—are crucial to the ultimate survival of the species. The Bighorn Youth Academy invites attendees to

In the Bighorn Youth Academy, attendees learn there are three varieties of bighorn sheep in the United States—Desert, Sierra Nevada, and Rocky Mountain—and that Peninsular bighorn are a subtype of the Desert variety. Their modified hooves make them agile and able to traverse the rocky, mountainous terrain surrounding the Coachella Valley.

not only help protect bighorn sheep by sharing their newfound knowledge with family and friends but also gives them a deeper understanding of their own ancestral lands.

“Peninsular bighorn sheep are a natural part of Southern California's heritage and the heritage of the Cahuilla people,” Waszak says. 🍌

DID YOU KNOW?

- The scientific name for the desert bighorn sheep is *Ovis canadensis nelsoni*.
- The lifespan of most bighorn sheep is 10–15 years.
- An average ewe weighs about 60 pounds, while a ram weighs approximately 105 pounds.
- A ram's horns can weigh as much as 30 pounds and are larger and curl farther than an ewe's.
- Bighorn sheep are herbivores that feed on mesquite, cholla cactus, cat's-claw acacia, and other native plants; they can go months without drinking water when plants are abundant and healthy because they can absorb the water they need from the plants they eat.
- Rams have been known to combat head-to-head for more than 24 hours.
- Besides mating rituals, rams also use their horns to open up food, such as cacti.

