

**“Mr. Bighorn”**  
**RICHARD A. WEAVER (1926–2017)**



Dick Weaver’s friends and family joined him to celebrate his 90th birthday in January 2016, when this photo was taken. Here, Weaver demonstrates his ability as an accomplished raconteur while Steve Hill, a long-time friend and colleague, listens intently.

Richard A. Weaver, known throughout the West as “Mr. Bighorn,” passed away on February 10, 2017, at the age of 91. With his passing, bighorn sheep and the deserts they inhabit lost one of the best friends they ever had. Dick began his career in 1948 with—what at the time was—the California Division of Fish and Game and, over the following 69 years, he retained a presence in the organization that shortly thereafter became the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). In his first position, he was assigned to build watering devices for upland game birds—commonly referred to as quail guzzlers—near Amboy, San Bernardino County. During that assignment, he recorded in his notes a midnight temperature of 112°F and, perhaps, his love affair with the desert then was born.

Early in his career, Weaver also worked in Riverside County, where he was involved in the production and distribution of pheasants for sport harvest. In 1951, he was assigned to Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Project W-26-D, where he again concentrated on the construction of wildlife watering devices for game birds and other

wildlife. While assigned to that project, he ensured the availability of surface water for use by wildlife at springs throughout southern California. During his years with Project W-26-D, he developed a tremendous knowledge of California's deserts and their associated fauna. Among the species that most intrigued him was the desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). Weaver eventually was promoted to a supervisory position and became the manager of the Imperial Wildlife Area in Imperial County, where he remained for 8 years.

In 1968, the California Senate passed Resolution 43, which provided funds for CDFG to conduct a statewide inventory of bighorn sheep. Weaver, who was still at the Imperial Wildlife Area, applied for the opportunity to lead the investigation, all the while realizing there were two potential benefits, and one potential detriment associated with that assignment. He would be able to leave the Imperial Wildlife Area (a positive), he would be able to put his vast knowledge of California's deserts and the natural history of bighorn sheep to constructive use (a positive), but it would entail a demotion from his supervisory role at IWA (a negative). Despite the cut in salary, Weaver always maintained that transferring to the bighorn sheep project was the best decision of his career.

From 1968 to 1972 Weaver investigated the status of bighorn sheep throughout California. During this period, he and the co-investigators who worked with him produced the first-ever comprehensive evaluation of bighorn sheep populations and their habitat in California. Their efforts resulted in publication of 14 detailed reports, with each one addressing the distribution, habitat conditions, disease issues, illegal take, recommendations for habitat acquisition, availability of water sources, and habitat enhancement needs in each of the geographic regions investigated. Much additional information has become available since those reports were published, but they remain as useful today as they were then, and are referenced on a regular basis in the professional literature.

Dick recognized water as one of many important habitat components for bighorn sheep, and he initiated the first projects to improve its distribution and availability with the goal of enhancing habitat for bighorn sheep. He realized that his agency couldn't do it alone, and he understood the value of using volunteers. In 1970, Weaver collaborated with the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep (SCBS)—the organization that played the primary role in passage of Senate Resolution 43—to create the Volunteer Desert Water and Wildlife Survey. That summer, he organized more than 200 Society volunteers to visit and report on habitat conditions and use by bighorn sheep at the numerous water sources that Weaver had personally selected. Born from that initial effort were the Society's Area Captain Program and the periodic 4th of July waterhole counts, both of which remain active today.

Such was the beginning of a long-term relationship between SCBS and CDFG; with Department personnel providing leadership, SCBS began implementing the habitat enhancements that Weaver had recommended. There was also enthusiastic support and cooperation from the Bureau of Land Management. The first wildlife water development designed to serve the summer needs of desert bighorn sheep was constructed in the Cady Mountains of San Bernardino County, where it continues to serve the needs of bighorn sheep and other desert wildlife. Subsequently, Weaver's recommendations resulted in the construction of dozens of similar water developments in the desert mountains of southeastern California.

In 1984 Dick and SCBS patriarch Marvin Wood jointly proposed a campaign they termed "10,000 by 2000." Ten thousand bighorn sheep in California by the year 2000 was far more than an unrealistic goal; it was, instead, a talking point intended to reinvigorate supporters and keep the ball moving to benefit bighorn sheep. And it worked! The slogan

raised awareness, money, volunteer participation and, ultimately, bighorn numbers. In 1986 Weaver addressed the California Legislature in an effort to reclassify selected populations of desert bighorn sheep as game animals, and he co-authored the legislation that resulted in the first bighorn sheep hunting season in 114 years. That action yielded benefits in terms of enhanced funding, additional management opportunities, and new-found support for habitat protection and enhancement, population restoration, and overall interest in the status of bighorn sheep in the Golden State. During the initial hunting season, Weaver emphasized the benefits associated with the harvest of the oldest, but not necessarily the largest, bighorn sheep. The result was creation of the Patriarch Award in 1987 (the first year of the hunt) and it has been presented on an annual basis by SCBS to the hunter taking the oldest ram.

Following completion of the bighorn sheep survey work, Weaver transferred to Sacramento and became the statewide project leader for bighorn sheep, mountain lion, and black bear management programs. Dick was also the CDFG expert on the distribution and numbers of feral donkeys in California, and the threats they presented to bighorn sheep and other desert wildlife. Weaver remained in his position as statewide coordinator until his retirement in 1989. Many don't know it, but Dick radio-collared the first mountain lion in California, and was also the first to use a dart-gun fired from a helicopter to capture a bighorn sheep. He shared leadership responsibilities for numerous capture events and translocations, and participated regularly in aerial surveys, even following his retirement. Weaver was one of two survivors of a helicopter crash in 1986 that resulted in the tragic deaths of pilot Don Landells and fellow wildlife biologist Jim Bicket.

An additional, and very important, aspect of Weaver's life involved the Desert Bighorn Council (DBC), a professional organization of biologists, naturalists, educators, and advocates, all with the goal of enhancing conservation and sharing knowledge of desert bighorn sheep. He was a charter member of that organization and, with one exception, attended every meeting since its founding in 1957. Why did he miss the one meeting? Weaver's boss at the time prohibited him from attending because bighorn sheep were not a priority for CDFG.

Weaver's career and leadership ultimately changed that and, even in retirement, he continued to support the Council. Over the years, Weaver attended more meetings of the DBC than any other individual. He served many years as Chair, or as a member, of the Council's Technical Staff, he was the long-term chair of the DBC Awards Committee, and he presented the status reports from California over a period of several decades. In 1986, Dick was recognized by the Council with the Desert Ram Award for his professional contributions to the conservation of bighorn sheep and his 30 years of service to the Council. The last meeting that Dick attended was held in Borrego Springs, California, in 2015; he was remembered fondly during several moving tributes presented at the 2017 Council meeting in St. George, Utah.

In preparing this tribute, we thought deeply about what it means to be a mentor, because that's what Dick was. Eventually, we came to understand that the best mentors don't realize they fulfill that role! Humility, kindness, and a welcoming nature—all of which are characteristics that greatly influence and inspire others—were the foundations of Weaver's personality. At professional meetings and in personal conversations he always said, "Do what's best for bighorn sheep." These words sometimes were uttered during challenging times or periods of passionate disagreement, but they always seemed to simplify decisions.

Dick's personality traits—his love and passion for bighorn sheep and their surroundings, his watching and being very aware of what was going on around him, his ability to listen to others without interrupting, his constant desire to learn, his sharing of knowledge and men-

toring others, and his recognition of others for their accomplishments—made him the special person he was. He was also a great story teller—a true raconteur—and he loved that role.

Weaver's knowledge—in terms of ecology, geography, and history—of the deserts of California was unparalleled. He was very likeable and he got along with everybody—a trait that helped him spread the word about desert bighorn sheep and the importance of the habitats upon which they depend. And his knowledge, gained from years of wearing out boot leather in the mountains and canyons of California, served him well when dealing with bureaucrats, whether in other agencies or in his own Department. Weaver seldom raised his voice, and he was slow to anger. One exception involved the poaching of numerous bighorn sheep by an individual whom Dick had befriended, trusted, and believed in; Dick was truly hurt by what transpired, and he never got over that betrayal.

Throughout his career, Dick inspired numerous young professionals and multitudes of equally passionate volunteers; many of those individuals became mentors to others. Thus, second and third generations—and beyond—are part of Weaver's legacy, and they will continue an advocacy for conservation. He had a "Yogi Berra" quality, and many of his quotes are still heard today. In their simplicity, though, there was also wisdom. We all know how he often said, "Do what's best for bighorn sheep."

Dick Weaver was a pioneer, an innovator, and a leader. He was an advocate for the desert as a special place: it was not a wasteland to be neglected. The late George Welsh, a long-term colleague of Weaver's, noted that, "Every good wildlife biologist should leave a number of footprints on the path of wildlife management." We submit that Weaver did not leave a few footprints—instead he established the path of wildlife management for desert bighorn sheep in the American southwest, a path that others will be following for many decades to come.

— *Friends and Colleagues of Richard A. Weaver*