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We're shooting mountain goats in a national park. Do we know why?

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman

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Something odd is happening in one of our national parks. Trained hunters — or more recently, not-so-well-trained amateurs — are shooting mountain goats in Grand Teton National Park. That's not the only thing that's odd: There's been little to no protest surrounding the shooting.

The park is in the process of killing approximately 100 mountain goats. I discovered this when I attended meetings at Snow King last winter about protecting the bighorn sheep that also live in the park. A federal interagency group had invited the public to help design a set of no-go zones for backcountry skiers to protect the herd of around 100 bighorns.

The shooting of the goats was mentioned only in passing. It was explained in terms of protecting the bighorns and presented as a settled decision. In a room full of environmental types, the policy raised hardly a murmur. I brought the question up but was politely told that the goats were exotics and disease-ridden and thus needed to be eliminated. Swayed by claims of science and intimidated by the general consensus, I assumed that I just was not up to speed on the issue.

Then COVID-19 hit, and I moved on to other matters — until an [article](#) appeared in the News&Guide describing the shooting. I was struck by the settled tone of the piece, which raised no moral issues about the killing. So I did a little digging. What I found was surprising.

The policy of shooting the goats has been based on two claims: They are not native to the area, and they may transfer disease to bighorn sheep. Both of these claims turn out to be questionable. Concerning the first, check out the U.S. Forest Service webpage, which notes that traditional mountain goat habitat reached down to 44 degrees north latitude. That latitude passes through Teton park.

As for the question of whether mountain goats traditionally inhabited the Tetons, I found a 2007 Wyoming Game and Fish Department paper that noted: "Archaeological evidence has confirmed mountain goats were present in western, central and southeastern Wyoming during the late

Pleistocene approximately 10,000 to 15,000 years ago.”

When did the mountain goats vanish? What caused their departure? I don't know. How did the goats return to the Tetons? They were brought to the Snake River Range in the 1960s and then migrated on their own to the Tetons, reestablishing themselves in natural habitat. Does this pathway make them exotic or native? That is debatable, but the question involves philosophic as well as scientific issues. (For instance, if they moved into the Tetons in 1870 or 1930 would that be OK?) For comparison, the National Park Service has chosen to treat the reintroduced wolves of Yellowstone as native.

The other reason given for eliminating the mountain goats is that they may transmit diseases to bighorn sheep. As one can imagine, this is hard to document one way or another. I contacted a wildlife biologist at Laval University named Steeve Coté, who graciously gave me 30 minutes of his time. At least on his account, the two populations generally stay away from one another in the wild. But even if there was some evidence of disease transmission, I'm not sure that this would justify shooting the goats rather than letting nature take its own path.

It's been suggested that in pursuing these points I'm being anti-science, staking out a position akin to climate deniers. It's an odd claim: Besides the point that I'm citing the science, I have a masters in environmental science. I also have a doctorate in philosophy, and I try to honor both perspectives when I run across questions like these.

I suspect that what we're seeing here is the playing out of a common theme: the belief that our environmental policies are “objective” if they're made on the basis of science. The word deserves to be put in scare quotes, for despite such assumptions, science is rarely objective. Neither is it subjective. Rather, science is usually quite complicated, especially when we're dealing with open systems like natural environments. Reasonable people can disagree on how to interpret the data. All of this is normal. The problem arises when these difficulties are glossed over and a straight, unequivocal line is drawn from science to policymaking.

Perhaps shooting the mountain goats is for the best. But it seems clear that the science is more ambiguous than we've been led to believe. And there are other approaches we could take, as advocated by a movement known as compassionate conservatism. At the least, we should stop pretending that such decisions are made simply on the basis of “objective science.”

One way to remedy this would be to include environmental ethicists within groups such as the

Teton Range Bighorn Sheep Working Group, which now consists entirely of wildlife biologists. Take an interdisciplinary approach, for questions of value are also central in deciding how we manage our national parks.

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