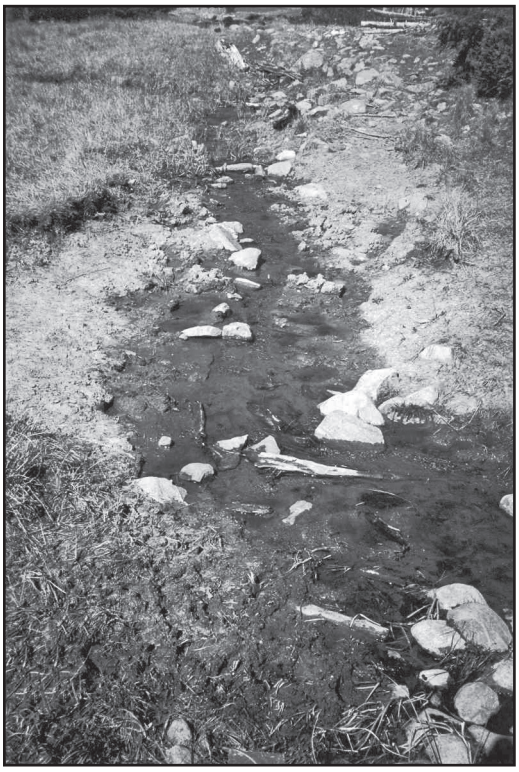
The Problem of Grazing in Wilderness: High Uintas

The High Uintas Wilderness in northeastern Utah is renowned for high-elevation ridgelines—rarely dropping below 11,000 feet and rising as high as 13,500 feet—as well as the largest expanse of contiguous alpine tundra in the central Rockies. The peaks give way to glacial basins holding sensitive meadow and wetland habitat, the headwaters of many of Utah's major rivers, and spawning habitat for Colorado River Cutthroat Trout—a species reliant upon clean, sediment-free river substrate for spawning. The area forms the heart of an important continent-spanning wildlife corridor connecting the southern Rockies in Colorado with the central and northern Rockies in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.



Small Uinta stream grazed

Small Uinta stream ungrazed

This 453,000-acre Wilderness is also the stage for an increasingly familiar battle. The high ridges, and scree-rimmed alpine meadows provide classic bighorn sheep habitat, and the Wilderness is home to a reintroduced, struggling population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. It is also the most heavily grazed Wilderness in the National Wilderness Preservation System with 261,075 acres—over half of the Wilderness—allotted to cows and domestic sheep. Right now, the Forest Service is considering the future of 10 domestic sheep allotments in the Wilderness, including one that has not been grazed in over 40 years, through a proposal that, if approved, would permit over 10,000 sheep and their lambs to graze for over two months every summer in the fragile, high elevation alpine basins—prime bighorn territory. It is a tired fact that bighorn die when they come into contact with domestic sheep, carriers of the pathogens *Mannheimia haemolytica, Bibersteinia trehalosi, Pasteurella multocida,* and *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*. In fact, herd die-offs from these deadly pneumonia transmissions are a major reason for dwindling bighorn populations. Once two million strong, bighorn populations in the nation have fallen to roughly 30,000 individuals. In the High Uintas, there are roughly 162 bighorn sheep—162—and the Forest Service recognizes that "the primary threat to these [bighorns] is disease (bacterial pneumonia)," that domestic sheep transmit pneumonia to bighorns, and that important bighorn habitat would be affected by these 10 allotments.

So why dump 10,000 domestic snot-swappers and their lambs in the remote territory of a struggling bighorn population? Well, the Forest Service says it considered that this might be a bad idea, but it ultimately decided that, because it couldn't guarantee bighorns wouldn't wander elsewhere and run into domestic sheep anyway (say on private land), why bother reducing the risk of contact in the Wilderness? It's been a while since we took a logic course, but this smells like one of those binary cop-outs. Why bother keeping the sharp knives out of reach of Little Johnny when he might wander to a neighbor's kitchen and poke his eye out anyway?

Bighorns aren't the only victims of the Forest Service's strained rationalizations. While the Forest Service is gun-shy on taking steps to protect bighorns from domestic sheep, it suffers less hand-wringing over authorizing (often ineffective) measures to protect domestic livestock from the Wilderness's wild residents. Predator "control" measures are commonplace—affecting bears, mountain lions, coyotes, and various other species. The spectacular alpine landscape is sacrificed for forage. Sensitive watersheds in the High Uintas subjected to domestic grazing average about 50 percent bare soil while watersheds that aren't grazed are nearly 100 percent covered in vegetation. Grazed watersheds suffer denuded and destabilized stream banks, loss of vegetative cover, loss of undercut banks and in-stream habitat, and an influx of sediment—bad news for spawning fish, not to mention manure-laden eye-sores for visiting humans. Of course, words are easy to explain away—pictures are more difficult.

East Fork Black's Fork grazed and eroding, with stream downcutting.

Uintas' Beaver Creek after decades of livestock exclusion.

Where would you rather pitch a tent? Where would a bighorn or an elk want to live?

The High Uintas is just one illustrative example of the incompatibility of grazing and Wilderness protection. Congress made special provision for grazing in the Wilderness Act, but, contrary to the way agencies often act, it certainly didn't intend to make the reduction or cessation of grazing in Wilderness more difficult than on other public lands. You can read more about our recommendations for ending grazing in Wilderness on our website. And, you can learn more about grazing conflicts in the High Uintas at: bit.ly/2ZY9e3L

In the High Uintas Wilderness, the conflicts with bighorns and the documented riparian damage should be enough for the Forest Service to seriously consider shutting down these 10 allotments. At the barest of bare minimums, it should not throw sheep on an allotment that has not been grazed in over 40 years. These are after all national forests meant to serve the broader conservation goals of our country, not domestic sheep pastures that serve the interests of only a few.

Facts cited and photos used in this article were drawn from the report, "Watershed Conditions Uinta Wilderness, Utah," by Dr. John Carter. Read the report: bit.ly/2P4noiu