

Revised

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April 28, 2004

5-5-04

THE PENINSULAR PRONGHORN--The most Endangered
Pronghorn in the World

Pronghorn are wild animals endemic only to North America for eons. Herds range from southcentral Canada, through the western plains of the United States, into northern Mexico. They are reported to be the fastest long-distance running mammal in the world. The taxonomic family of Pronghorn includes five subspecies--one of which is the peninsular Pronghorn. This subspecies is found in the Vizcaino Desert on the Baja California peninsula, and is the only pronghorn population occupying rangelands within sight of the ocean. During past aerial surveys, whales have been seen in the Pacific Ocean and herds of pronghorn running on the desert--all in the same day. Because the Vizcaino Desert is reported to not have available permanent natural drinking water sources for pronghorn, the subspecies has adjusted to these harsh environmental arid conditions by obtaining water as dew (on vegetation) received during frequent fogs coming from the Pacific Ocean--a remarkable survival adaptation for a wild ungulate.

Peninsular Pronghorn live entirely within the Vizcaino Desert. This environment has always sustained low densities compared to more abundant populations living on northern lush, extensive grasslands of Canada and the United States. However, contemporary

wild peninsular populations appear to be experiencing a decreasing trend in numbers--due in part to the influences of modern human stewardship activities (poaching, competition with livestock for forage, etc.). Past surveys estimate the population to range around 200 wild animals, however, more recent surveys indicate numbers appear less. Apparently recent long-term droughts have contributed to the dilemma. The average amount of precipitation is around three and a half inches per year--but less than half this amount has been received in recent years. Thus, limited rains producing inadequate supplies of nutritious forage result in decreased fawn recruitment and smaller herd numbers.

This plight has aroused the concerns of the government of Mexico and conservationists around the world. During the last decade, two workshops have been conducted in La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico to develop strategies identifying long-term survival rates for this subspecies. Funding has been received from private sources (notable Ford Motors Company and some zoos) thus supporting a world-wide collaborative effort to enhance populations and habitat conditions. The future again looks more promising for this little speedster of the wide open deserts.

With the aid of international cooperative interest and funding, an exciting wildlife management venture is currently underway. Government management agencies on the Vizcaino Desert have developed a captive Pronghorn raising program that totals more than 130 animals as of April 10, 2004--with another 20 anticipated

births this spring. The herd originated from captured and hand-raised wild fawns, together with adult animals caught and added to the experimental herd. This spring, it is anticipated that around 50 fawns will be produced and the majority will be recruited into the expanding herd. The objective of the captive/rearing program is to produce around 50 animals a year that can be translocated to now unoccupied historic habitats in an attempt to reestablish wild herds in varying multiple locations--thus alleviating the possibility of a complete loss of the subspecies should a natural catastrophic event (such as a major hurricane or disease) extirpate the total population in only one location. Should this translocation effort be accomplished successfully, it will be the first wildlife management attempt to establish wild progeny from captive raised herds back into native habitats for pronghorn anywhere in North America. The first planned release is for the autumn of 2004 on adjacent unoccupied historic habitat to present herds on the Vizcaino Desert. It will mark the completion of over a decade of experimental captive field raising, international interest-funding, and dedicated professional wildlife management--truly a credit to an ambitious, provocative wildlife management endeavor in Mexico.

Another future goal of this program, is the reintroduction of this subspecies to the United States. In the past, four projects have been accomplished to translocate herds from the

United States to Mexico. Now, plans are looking into the feasibility of transferring some of the peninsular subspecies to southern California. This was historic pronghorn habitat but herds were extirpated about a century ago. It is assumed that pronghorn from southern climes would possibly be more adaptive to arid southern California conditions; however, animals have not been previously available for southern populations.

"Berrendo" is the Spanish common name for pronghorn. With the development of this major capture/raising program and the release of numerous herds on historic habitats in Mexico and the United States, it is conceivable that the future of this presently endangered species may be more sustained in perpetuity. If so, the motto of this wildlife management endeavor could well be "Long Live the Pronghorn", or as say in Spanish "Viva el Berrendo"!!