

LAST AFRICAN ORYX

REMOVED FROM WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT



NPS PHOTOS

African oryx (*Oryx gazella* or gemsbok)

were released near White Sands National Monument on the U.S. Army–White Sands Missile Range by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish in the 1960s.

The purpose was to establish a population for public hunting on military land. Oryx proved more successful in New Mexico than expected. The original herd of approximately 100 animals increased to more than 4,000 in southern New Mexico despite an active hunting program. Factors such as not requiring surface water, fecundity (i.e., females becoming pregnant soon after calving every nine months), and ineffective predation contributed to the success of the species.

The National Park Service (NPS) completed a 67-mile boundary fence in 1996 to exclude oryx from White Sands National Monument. However, animals contained within the fence increased in population, with concomitant impacts by the 450-pound animals to soil and vegetation. At the time the population was increasing at a rate of 20 to 30% per year; if left uncontrolled the situation would have caused severe resource degradation. Removing the oryx from NPS land was complicated by the lack of roads in the 144,000-acre (58,320-ha) monument and the oryx’s habit of disbursing widely over the desert.

A draft environmental assessment was prepared in 1998, presenting the preferred alternative of NPS staff shooting the estimated 140 to 190 animals. Thereafter, a critical news article resulted in an organized letter-writing campaign with 161 respondents from coast to coast objecting to the proposed management action.



As a result of public input, oryx removal plans shifted to more expensive and dangerous non-lethal management methods. These included the use of helicopters and all-terrain vehicles for herding oryx to openings in the fence, and also shooting them with anesthesia-filled darts followed by loading the drugged animals in a sling attached to a helicopter for transport out of the monument. Park staff and partners tried constructing one-way gates in the boundary fence that

would allow the animals to leave the monument, but the attempt was not successful. Contraceptive drug darting to prevent further expansion of the population was not considered feasible.

Several partners assisted monument staff in carrying out the helicopter sling-loading operation over several years. They included the NPS Biological Resource Management Division, Carlsbad Caverns and Mesa Verde National Parks, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, U.S. Army–White Sands Missile Range, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Funding for the operation came from the Natural Resource Preservation Program and the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program.

The initial herding and sling-loading operation was effective, resulting in the removal by nonlethal means of 174 oryx from White Sand National Monument from 1999 to 2001. Nevertheless, helicopter search time to locate oryx increased greatly as the animals became scarcer, and the cost per animal escalated. Subsequently, the National Park Service publicly released an environmental assessment in November 2001 recommending complete removal of the relatively few remaining oryx by lethal means, with support of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The monument received 39 letters supporting the project and 9 that either opposed it or confused it with other management issues, and the National Park Service signed a “Finding of No Significant Impact” to begin the final phase of control.

The project was well covered by regional media, as well as the *Wall Street Journal* and *High Country News*. Twenty-five animals have been shot to date and no fresh sign has been detected, suggesting that oryx no longer roam within the fenced portion of White Sands National Monument. Long-term, annual maintenance by tracking and shooting (if any oryx are detected) is planned, as is maintaining the 67-mile fence indefinitely.

Bill Conrod, biologist, White Sands National Monument, New Mexico;
bill_conrod@nps.gov.

