

Goats in the Olympics... what lies ahead?

Aliens Introduced

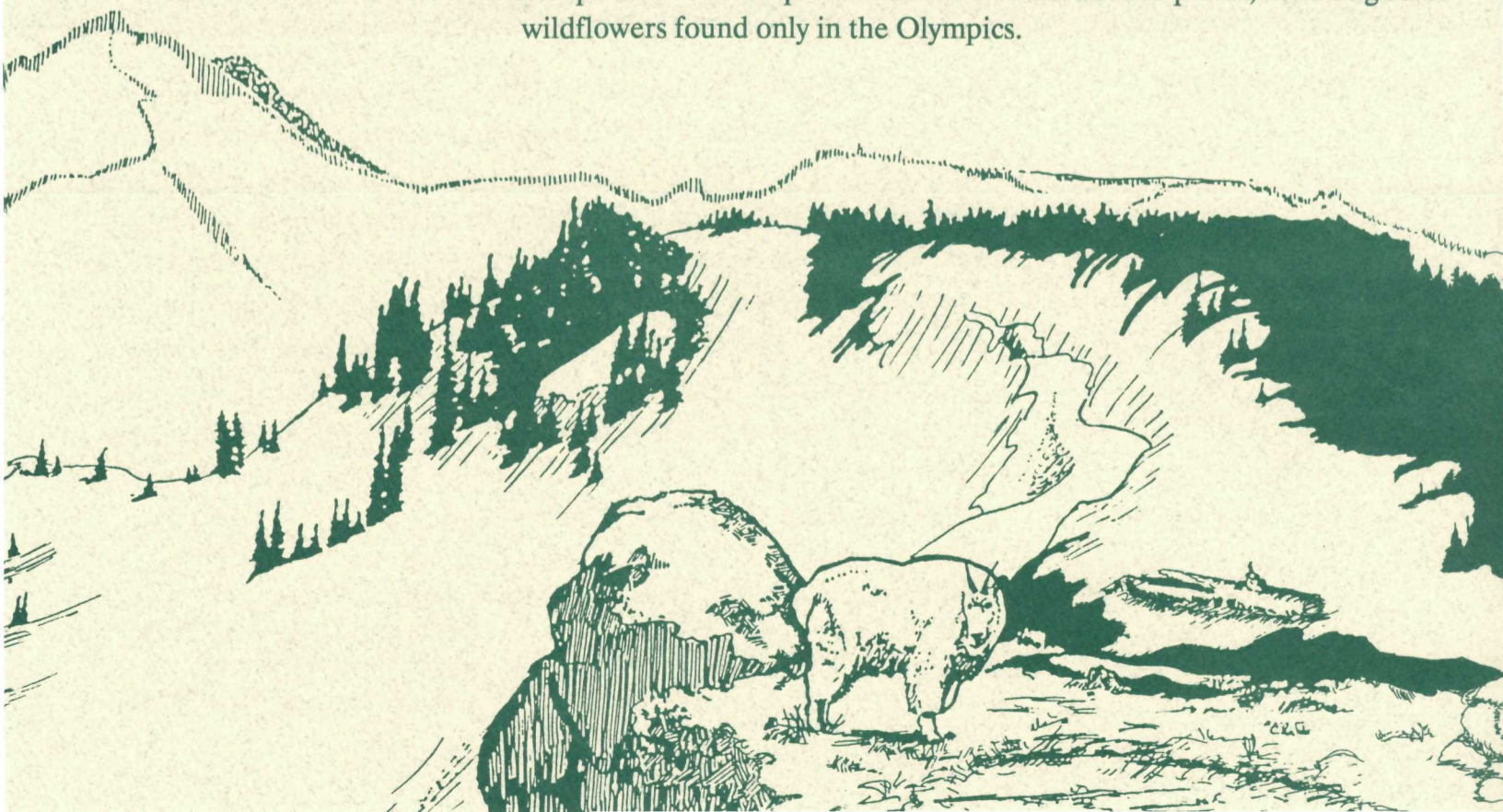


The Olympic Peninsula is a mountainous island in a "sea" of saltwater and lowlands. This isolation kept many animals native to the Cascade Mountains from colonizing the Olympics, including pikas, lynx, grizzly bears, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats. In the 1920s, prior to Olympic National Park's establishment, local sportsmen traded Roosevelt elk for 12 mountain goats, and released them on the Olympic Peninsula. The newcomers thrived, and by 1983 nearly 1,200 goats were spread throughout the Olympic mountains, impacting plant communities that have evolved over thousands of years of isolation.



Damage to Native Plants

Over a decade of park research confirms that non-native mountain goats cause significant changes in mountain plant communities. They erode soil by digging wallows for dust bathing. Their grazing and trampling alters the composition of subalpine meadows and affects rare plants, including some wildflowers found only in the Olympics.



Goat Management

To reduce goat impacts, population control efforts began in 1981. Since then, over 400 goats have been removed using several live-capture techniques:

In 1988, Olympic's management plan called for making the park's interior goat-free and reducing their numbers along the eastern boundary. Live-capture was to be used the first three years, with shooting added later where capture was not effective.

But as goat numbers declined, capture of the remaining animals became more difficult. In 1990, the removal program was stopped when capture in the park's rugged mountains became too dangerous for personnel and goats.

Park managers are re-evaluating the 1988 management plan for several reasons. Live capture is no longer feasible because of safety hazards. In addition, new studies have located concentrations of rare plants along the eastern border of the park, where the 1988 plan called for controlling, but not eliminating goats. Research has shown that even low numbers of goats adversely impact their adopted habitat.



Restoring the Park



A draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) examining a range of alternatives for mountain goat management in Olympic National Park was released in March 1995. The study identified a preferred alternative of eliminating the park's remaining goats by shooting. Following the public comment period, a final EIS will be written, with release scheduled for fall 1995. The final decision is anticipated during the winter of 1995-96. Park managers realize that this issue is controversial and do not look forward to carrying out the proposed strategy. However, the results of over 20 years of scientific studies show that it is the best way to assure the preservation of native resources unique to Olympic National Park.

For more information, please write to:

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