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The Sacrificial Ram

Charlie Ebbers

The opening bid was \$200,000. It was about 10:40 at night, and people had been buying up hunting tags for big game animals, rifles, fur coats and bottles of liquor for a few hours. But this last one was a big one: the Montana Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep tag, good for the right to hunt one male mountain sheep in any legal hunting district in the state. Twenty seconds later the bid was up to \$230,000.

From the start there were five bidders sitting at round dinner tables strung out in front of the stage. Auctioneer assistants wearing cowboy hats raced across the width of the 62,000 square foot room to keep up with the five hands that shot into the air.

The bidders looked cool and calm, but the air was tense. At the back of the room a gallery of people watched, but the hands stopped coming up at \$250,000 and the action stalled for a half-minute before jumping to \$270,000.

At \$280,000 the bidding came down to a duel between two men, only a table apart from each other. One was dressed in jeans, a white half-collared dress shirt, a black jacket and a black cowboy hat with a prim turkey feather in it; the other, a man with loose-fitting dress clothes. The man in black was John Lewton. He looked like a hit man from New Mexico. The other man, Willie Hettinger, like a well-dressed basketball coach.

The next jump, from \$280,000- \$300,000 went in a minute and each man talked into his phone, trying to hear over the noise of the auctioneer. "Can I get \$305,000?" "05,000?" "305,000!"

Like a handful of other items that night, the actual buyers weren't in the room. Lewton and Hettinger are both bighorn sheep experts from Montana, go-to guys if someone is looking for a trophy book ram. The moneyed buyers called the shots from somewhere else, and relied on their man on the phone to place their bid.

The auctioneer prodded the crowd in the back of the room for support but allowed the bidders to talk into their phones. He called "let's see \$310,000!" But, the action played out, the room's noise stayed, and "\$305,000! Sold!" rang from the speakers.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks biologist Bruce Strickland walked over from the other side of the room with a manila envelope. Since Strickland hadn't seen the winner, he walked up to Lewton first, who shook his head and said "No," and pointed to Hettinger.

The room emptied. The tag was the last auction item of the night. Someone paid \$305,000 for a single bighorn sheep tag and it was in the hands of Hettinger by 10:50.

Hettinger, wide-eyed with adrenaline, smiling ear-to-ear, eased into his chair while friends and acquaintances came by to slap him on the back, say hello and share in the excitement.

Lewton collected himself and walked over to make small talk with Hettinger's table. He made no show of emotion. On his way out of the room Strickland wouldn't say who had bought the tag, but he was happy with the money.

“I would’ve been happy with \$275,000- \$300,000” he said “but \$305,000? That’s great!”

Lewton, on his way off of the bidding floor, said, “Ran ‘em up to 300k, but what can you do? Jimmy John bought it again.”

Jimmy John is James John Liataud, the founder and CEO of the Jimmy Johns sandwich shop franchise. He has bought four of Montana’s bighorn sheep tags in the last 8 years – total price: \$1,115,000.

Every year since the mid-1980s, Montana, along with other Western states, tribes and Canadian provinces, auctions off special hunting licenses to the highest bidder at a series of hunting shows, generally in January or February. The licenses are called “governor’s tags,” “auction tags,” or “provincial tags.”

Most states auction one tag per big game species, and bighorn sheep generally bring in the most money. The revenue generated in Montana is legislatively designated to go back toward wild bighorn sheep conservation initiatives. The sale of the one tag, one bighorn sheep, will pay for the betterment of all the other bighorn sheep in the state.

The North American model of conservation defines the tradition of wildlife management in the United States. The foundation of the model holds that wildlife is held in a public trust for all people. It is thought to be unique from any other model of wildlife management on the planet. Distinct from the European model that maintains wildlife is a resource for the rich, inaccessible to the ordinary citizen.

State wildlife agencies see the auction tags as a valuable fundraising tool. In the wild sheep world, the trophy ram pursued by the high bidders is sometimes called the Jesus sheep. His life is sold for the good of all the other sheep.

The auction tag money could open the gates to special matching federal funds that can triple the cash flow to wild sheep conservation in the state. But, critics say selling prime trophy animals to the highest bidder undercuts the integrity of North America’s distinctive model of wildlife conservation. In Montana, the money that the auction tags have brought in hasn’t ensured a healthy population of bighorn sheep.

The question becomes: Do the tags pose a threat to the North American model of conservation by introducing a caste system into hunting, one that divides access to wild game between the very wealthy, and all the rest?

Jim Posewitz, 81, worked with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks for 40 years before starting a hunting organization called “Orion” and writing the book, “Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting.” His slim book is given to hunters education students, usually 12-14 year-olds, in Montana when they graduate from the class. New hunters must take hunters education before they can hunt big game in Montana.

He says the auction tag system is the “sirens calling to Ulysses,” a seductive funding method that chips away at the idea of wildlife held as a public trust.

“We’ve gone from no animals to an abundance, to seeing how much money we can make out of it,” Posewitz said from his home overlooking the Helena Valley. “We might lose the democracy of wildlife.”

In the last eight years the bighorn sheep tag has brought more than \$2.5 million directly to the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks bighorn sheep program. The department may then seek federal money to match the revenue, generally getting three dollars for every one brought in by auction. Managed well, those eight rams could have brought in over \$10 million to support state-run wildlife conservation.

The money is legislatively designated by the Montana legislature to be used only for the substantial benefit of mountain sheep in the state. But the accounting is sparse.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks officials say they have only tracked the funds of one \$329,820 project in the last eight years – a \$329,820 state investment of auction tag dollars, which was matched by \$989,458 from a federal fund.

The funding comes from an excise tax on firearms and ammunition sales. Montana's portion of the bighorn tag is matched by the Pittman-Robertson fund. The \$1,319,278 project was started in 2013 and is an ongoing multiple agency study.

Quentin Kujala, the wildlife management chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks cannot say how other money raised or matched through the auction tags is spent. There is potential for one new project in 2017. Besides that, no other bighorn sheep project received federal money in the last eight years, nor have grant applications for funding been submitted, according to Kujala.

“Beyond this specific project, FWP does not track PR (Pittman-Robertson) expenditures by species,” Kujala said, referring to the 2013 project.

There is a part of the wildlife economy that goes like this: State wildlife departments give special licenses to a non-profit third party organization for auction. Hunters bid on the licenses, and the amount they spend that exceeds the cost of a general license is taken as a tax write-off. A share of the proceeds is given to the third party-- non-profit conservation groups with varied missions and track records. The rest is returned to the state wildlife agencies.

The Wild Sheep Foundation hosts the “Sheep Show” each year in Reno, Nevada. It's a Thursday-to-Saturday affair held in January, when last year's hunting season has passed, and plans are made for the next fall. This year's nightly auctions were held at the Peppermill Casino after days spent showcasing hunts, guides and gear at the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. It is one of the richest hunting auctions in the country, surrounded by one of the largest hunting conventions. Bidding follows a fundraising dinner to benefit The Wild Sheep Foundation. A plate costs \$100.

Auction tags give the buyer privileges to hunt wildlife statewide in hunting districts that are hard to get. Hunting districts are geographical zones within a state that wildlife departments use to regulate harvest quotas. Another tenant of the North American model of conservation is that hunting regulations will be scientifically formulated. Harvest quotas for each district are based on wildlife population numbers and the social “carrying capacity” within that physical habitat.

To get a license to hunt bighorn sheep rams means most people apply for a lottery drawing with low odds. Some hunting districts have more, or higher quality hunting opportunities,

and attract more applicants; getting a license to hunt in those districts is even more competitive.

A hunter of average financial means may spend a lifetime applying for a license to hunt a bighorn sheep ram in a hunting district like Montana's Missouri Breaks. In 2015, 7,112 people applied for 25 licenses giving everyone who applied a mere .35% chance of getting a license.

A hunter of extraordinary wealth may spend the span of a dinner hour, or 10 minutes on the phone and gobs of cash to secure an auction tag. General hunting tags aren't tax deductible, but auction tags are almost entirely tax write-offs for the successful bidder with enough tax liability.

For example, this year's auction tag sold for \$305,000 to Liautaud, and that purchase can be turned into a purchase of a \$1,250 nonresident hunting license. But the rest, the \$303,750 difference, turns into a charitable donation to the Wild Sheep Foundation. The foundation is registered as a public charity with the IRS.

Montana's auction tag allows for the winning bidder to go to any hunting district during any season open to other hunters. Auction tag rules aren't the same across the board. For example, Arizona's auction tag grants the winner full rein- a hunter may use any weapon, in any unit where bighorn sheep are for one full year, regardless of the season.

At the Sheep Show in Reno, wealthy hunters mix with Montana guides who rub elbows with wildlife biologists, small businesses and captains of industry. It's an exciting atmosphere, where vendors sell the hunt of a lifetime and the gear to pursue it. Only a fraction of the people in attendance can afford to buy that dream, but chasing it is open to everyone in North America.

Douglas J. Leech, paid \$480,000 for Montana's auction tag in 2013, the most money the tag has generated in Montana's history. In 2014, the tag went for \$420,000 to Mohammed Bin Hamad Al Sharqi, the Crown Prince of the emirate of Fujairah. In 2015, the tag sold for \$320,000 to a man named Rick Warren Jr.

"Everybody's got a pucker point. Mine is just higher than most," said Rick Warren Jr., 56, sitting on a white leather couch next to one of the countless gelato bars in the Peppermill Casino Lobby before a January 2016 auction.

Warren Jr. is tall, quiet and unassuming; he had the beginnings of a beard and wore the same pair of Dockers two days in a row in Reno. He once shared ownership of Warren Equipment Company, his family's construction equipment empire in North and West Texas. He hunts, he said, to fill a museum that will teach children about the world's wild game animals.

Warren Jr. bought the Montana auction tag at the Sheep Show in Reno in January 2015, for almost a third of a million dollars, so that he could hunt the state's Missouri Breaks.

He spent at least another \$130,000 researching the area before he went hunting. His money went to aircraft rentals, photographers in the field, and food and research costs.

He said he was un-guided, but he financed the entire event for his “sheep team.” Namibian Black Rhino hunter Corey Knowlton, his personal taxidermist Chris Cammack, and artist, photographer and bighorn sheep guru Jon Lewton advised him.

“The bigger the tag, the more money you spend,” Warren Jr. said. “Once you drop \$320,000 on a tag, what’s another \$20,000 or \$30,000?” He left Montana with a trophy set of horns, and over 60 pounds of meat.

After hunting deer and birds for most of his life he started a campaign to kill trophy animals from across the world about seven years ago. He’s hunted six continents, and averaged 145 hunting days every year since he sold his second business venture, his family’s service industry centered on oil and gas compression systems.

The world is becoming more populated and landscapes where big animals can exist is shrinking. Hunting, Warren Jr. said, is one of the most effective financial tools available to assure that wild game populations are managed for abundance.

Warren Jr., is one of a small group of hunters who have the money and the will to buoy wildlife programs. These are the big bulls of the wildlife economy. And according to Warren Jr., that model has served big game species in the U.S. and Canada well: “All of us are the custodians of the resource. In Africa, the government is, and in Europe the entrepreneur, or landowner, owns it.”

Some men at the auction stagger around drunk, proud and belligerent. But most other people, the ones who designed this system come to support wild sheep. They sat and told stories of great days on the mountain or in the canyons and about the next big wildlife project.

Some of these men have hunted sheep in Montana’s Missouri Breaks. Many, many more– in Reno and back in Montana– dream of hunting the Breaks.

“It’s just the Holy Grail sheep tag,” said Matt “Rip” Rippentrop, 38, from his home in Hot Springs, South Dakota. A project engineer with the South Dakota Department of Transportation, Rippentrop paid \$50 to enter the general license lottery for a bighorn sheep in 2010. He was one of 6,289 people who applied. Twenty-five would be chosen. The chance of him being one of them: 0.4 percent.

He got it. And paid the full cost of a nonresident license in 2010, \$750.

Rippentrop had seven weeks’ vacation saved up when his name was drawn and he spent all of them hunting and scouting a choice corner of the brittle 590 square miles of canyon country carved by the Missouri River.

The world of the choicest rams is one of jugged ledges, dramatic elevation reliefs, rocky escarpments and sheer rock walls that send rock slides to the valley thousands of feet below. They walk well-worn paths woven among the shadows of the cliffs; they cross talus slopes and flee predators across slot canyons. Pursued, the sheep can vanish into impossibly inaccessible haunts. It is a punishing hunt for the teams that take it on.

The passion hunters feel for pursuing these animals seems born from the energy of the animal itself. The bighorn sheep ram is composed of primal fears and imminent, undeniable power. A ram’s skull can weigh around 40 pounds and with his powerful back legs he can

batter smaller males to death with his horns during the mating season. Old rams live to be a bit over 10 years old, and the deep rings in their curved horns tell their age.

Bighorn sheep hunting is the stuff of legends: In Genesis, on Mount Moriah, Abraham wrested a ram from a thorn bush and slaughtered it with a knife, instead of his own son Isaac, as a testament to God; Jason's golden fleece was made from a golden-haired ram symbolic of royalty.

Lewis and Clark's expedition saw bighorn sheep in the Upper Missouri Breaks and they killed at least two near where Rippentrop hunted. The expedition marveled at the size of the rams' horns and brought four horns of the "mountain ram" back to President Jefferson in Washington D.C.

Rippentrop and his team took their time, living in wall tents and bunkhouses for weeks. They ate MREs and canned chili, and scouted and hunted for days on end, passing on full-curl, but less mature rams in pursuit of a true giant. They weren't alone in the wild.

James John Liataud hunted the same year, which Rippentrop said made hunting stressful. Everyone was in pursuit of a trophy. He said that helicopters were going out and looking for a big ram, and "everybody has got 10 friends with him." Rippentrop scouted in the summer and hunted every month of the fall. He left the first day of rifle season because there were too many people running around the area.

Rippentrop says he is proof that the lottery system works, that any hunter can draw a tag and get a trophy animal. But he also acknowledges it takes money to keep the sheep on the mountain and if that takes offering high-dollar hunters something special, it's worth the trade off.

"When you start pumping out those big rams, that's the biology, that's cherry on top," he says. And Montana has consistently been producing giant rams. By mid-November of 2010, Rippentrop killed the third largest ram ever on record in Montana. Liataud, the thirtieth.

Gray Thornton is a pragmatic man who has mastered the tools at his disposal. He's CEO of the Wild Sheep Foundation, and he's in charge of the Sheep Show and everything it takes to turn a sterile convention center into a den of wild dreams and dramatic landscapes. He likes to be at the center of the room, and feel the buzz his organization created.

"It's a bastardization of the North American model," Gray Thornton said of the auction tags. But, "it works."

After graduating college in California with a business degree, Thornton worked as a salesman for Xerox before coming to the wildlife industry. He started in the early '90s at the Safari Club, which specializes in the sale of safari hunts at their auction. Thornton worked his way up to executive director of the Dallas Safari Club before becoming CEO of the Wild Sheep Foundation in 2008.

He learned in those years that to have political clout a person has to have money and be able to get votes. In America's hunter-based conservation system, the Wild Sheep Foundation has both. Thornton's job consists of marshaling money and resources.

At the Sheep Show, the Reno-Sparks Convention Center was a bustle. Four busses that can seat about 50 people each ran on 10-20 minute cycles all day from the Peppermill to the

Convention Center. One of the bus drivers estimates he drove the 1-mile route about 15 times each day.

The convention center housed more than 100 exhibits. Professional or 'big-name,' big game hunters gave talks about long-range shooting or hunting ethics and signed their hard-backed books. The food was overpriced, but the lemonade was good.

Small groups huddled across the sprawling convention center's floor – buyers looking for the best chance to get a good ram and guides showing photos of rams in their respective territories. To try to sell hunts, state officials gave out information about their tags. Most states had some sort of a local non-profit sheep group near the state game departments booth, or directly attached to it.

The state of Idaho played a video of big rams that lived through the last hunting season. In it they show the big rams in the different districts and talk with guides about the different sized horns each bighorn sheep carries.

The convention center is a business bustle, with the normal ebb and flow of customers. Most everyone is wearing Wrangler jeans, a cowboy hat or camouflage. The Wild Sheep Foundation keeps the event from lulling by offering raffles throughout the day.

Full body mounts of nearly every type of cloven-hoofed animal adorn the booths of guides who offer exotic hunts on every continent in the world, excepting Antarctica. The predators are there, too. Stuffed grizzly bears, jaguars and African lions line the floor, false eyes sparkling in the florescent lights. At least 23 different types of fur coats were for sale, ranging from Chinese raccoon to sterling fox. Some of the jackets would become fodder for the auction later that night at the Peppermill Casino.

Past the taxidermy and the fur coats, in the back corner a group of unlikely salespeople gathered. These are state biologists and wildlife managers, tribal, and provincial fish and game agents who promote the glories of the districts they manage.

Except for Montana. The Big Sky state's booth felt oddly like a reluctant salesman. For a place with the biggest rams, the table shows few photos, a magazine and a list of all the bighorn sheep harvested in the last year with their horn measurements. That's it. No videos, no glossy handouts. It holds details of its wildlife locations close to the vest to avoid giving the auction tag hunter an even bigger advantage.

"There's a limited quantity, and lots of demand," Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks biologist Bruce Strickland said, explaining why Montana's tags draw such high bids.

"Maybe it's the soil, or the clay," says Bruce Strickland, about the size of Montana's Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep rams, while sitting at the booth, "but we grow probably the biggest in the world." Montana has produced most trophy book rams of any in North America. The state holds 789 records, more than twice the amount of Alberta, the second most area with 357, according to Boone and Crockett Club records.

The Montana booth didn't get a lot of visitors. Folks stopped by, took a magazine and the measurements then moved on to the flashier booths. Montana's auction tags, on average, go for more than any other state, but the state doesn't offer up too much information to prospective buyers.

Yet Strickland says the reason Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks has been coming to the Sheep Show, and probably will be next year is because the Wild Sheep Foundation creates an atmosphere that has brought in the most money for the state.

By the end of business hours Saturday, everyone wanted out of the convention center, and headed back to the Peppermill for the last night of the event.

Once Jimmy John's Liautaud bought the Montana tag, Friday night was a wrap. Saturday night's auction was the last event of the Sheep Show.

The Arizona desert bighorn sheep auction tag sold for \$380,000 up from \$225,000 in 2015. Warren Jr., left midway through the auction, he said that the Arizona tag had blown right past him.

The \$155,000 increase came because of a photo of a particular ram someone had been showing buyers, Thornton said. Colorado's tag sold for \$95,000, Idaho's tag went for \$90,000 and New Mexico sold for \$177,500.

The Wild Sheep Foundation doesn't get a cut from every state. Some auction tags, like Arizona's, go entirely back to the state. In addition to the auction revenue that returns to the states, tribes, and provinces, sometimes the Foundation makes direct donations to states from other fundraising activities.

"Seventy-seven point eight of every dollar WSF spent last year went to mission programs – a metric we are pretty damn proud to own." Thornton said in a follow-up email.

The Wild Sheep Foundation was founded in 1977. Its headquarters moved from Cody, Wyoming, to Bozeman, Montana, in April 2016. It has a small staff, but they act as an instigator and a spearhead for wild sheep projects nationwide. The money Thornton's foundation raises at auctions makes them relevant in today's conservation world, he said.

Throughout their tenure they've changed names a few times, but the foundation wants to be "the best managed, most respected and most influential conservation organization in the world, for the benefit of all stakeholders and wild sheep worldwide."

Their website says the foundation's purpose is to "put and keep sheep on the mountain."

But the foundation doesn't own any sheep. The sheep are owned by the public and managed by the state. And the state of Montana, Thornton said, is doing a poor job of accounting for the money it receives from the tag sales.

Transparency is key to the auction tag system, Thornton says, but there is a systemic accountability issue that his foundation has faced with the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. Montana's accounting for where the tag money goes has been poor. And he thinks that accounting needs to be fixed.

Despite hard science, conservation initiatives and the significant money that comes from the auction tag, on a statewide scale there are fewer wild sheep on the mountain in Montana now than there were just a few years ago. But, more hunters want to pursue them.

In 2009, the statewide quota of 386 bighorn licenses available for hunters to draw statewide in Montana attracted more than 17,800 applications.

In 2015, eight auction tags worth more than \$2,535,000 later, the quota had fallen to 259 licenses statewide with more than 20,000 applications according to the "Drawing Statistics Report" put out by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks.

Each of Montana's bighorn sheep herds is unique and some herds exist in near isolation from others. The majority of Montana's bighorn sheep herds have fewer than 100 animals in them, which creates a dangerous dynamic. If one sheep contracts a disease it's likely that it will infect the entire herd.

Death can come easy to bighorn sheep. If a domestic sheep comes into contact with a wandering ram, or a bighorn sheep that's dispersed from one herd goes to an isolated herd, harmless pathogens from that one sheep may decimate the other herd.

That's the Judas sheep. The one animal that wanders from the herd can bring death to them all. This dynamic has made bighorn sheep a notoriously hard species to recover, because they are social animals, sensitive to disease and susceptible to massive die-offs.

Quentin Kujala, the wildlife management chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said that the Wild Sheep Foundation funding is essential to studying the herds and developing new ways to improve their numbers.

The state is funding an on-going \$250,000 comprehensive study at Montana State University that's headed by Dr. Bob Garrott. Figure in the federal matching funds and that comes out to a million-dollar study focused on understanding what type of disease pathogens lead to the die-offs in bighorn sheep herds around the state. This study is part of the \$329,820 PR grant from 2013.

"We've spent millions of dollars testing for pathogens across the West, and it's been foggy," Garrott said.

Rippentrop, in his home state of South Dakota helped create an auction tag system that reintroduced and augmented wild sheep and goat populations in his state.

"I can't tell you that I'm in favor of the auction tag," he said, "I can tell you I'm a fan of the money and what it's done for the bighorn sheep." Rippentrop says he spent thousands of hours on the phone researching different states, and talking to sportsmen organizations. At first, people he talked with didn't want to start an auction tag program. But South Dakota's bighorn sheep population numbers were dropping, and the money from the tag seemed like a remedy.

"Without the tags, we wouldn't have sheep in South Dakota. That's where we were going. Well, maybe we'd have 10 raggedy ones," Rippentrop says.

He saw the tags work, he saw how things went in Reno. He believes his trophy ram is a sign of good biology, and he felt he had to take the idea home. But, he wanted the system to be totally transparent.

The first few years after South Dakota created an auction tag locals wanted to know where the money went. Sportsmen asked about how the money was spent and what was being done for bighorn sheep in the state. Rippentrop says for the first two years everybody watched closely. But, the state has brought in bighorn sheep and mountain goats, and questions have cooled. The results of the tag, he says, walk on the mountain.

Rippentrop joked about the buyers of auction tags, "Yeah, those 'mean' auction tag guys, putting more sheep on the mountain." In South Dakota, he's watching the herds grow.

Yet in Montana, the odds of getting a tag have waned for hunters who apply through the lottery system, and there are fewer wild mountain sheep. While the Reno-Sparks Convention Center is booked for next January, where a 10'x10' booth costs \$1,650 for vendors at the 2017 Sheep Show.