The Navajo Sheep Herder

Joseph Powell
Hopi Indian Reservation

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester
Part of the Forest Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol21/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ames Forester by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The Navajo Sheep Herder

JOSEPH HOWELL, JR., '25
Forest Supervisor, Hopi Indian Reservation, Arizona

EDITOR'S NOTE: The problem of grazing on forest lands is always a pertinent one to administer correctly. Mr. Howell has a grazing problem on the Hopi Indian Reservation, of which he is supervisor, that is unique and extremely difficult. He has about 2,500,000 acres of land under his jurisdiction. In presenting the Navajo as a sheep herder, it is clear to any one, after reading the article, as to why he is confronted with so important a problem in connection with grazing.

MOST popular literature states that the Navajo Indian is a "natural born sheep herder." This fallacy should be corrected since any experienced observer would soon find that the reverse is more than true. He would find that the sheep industry has survived only through the type of stock originally used and the persistence of the Navajo in preserving his flocks. The object of this paper is to present a few of the facts concerning the methods of handling the sheep and range by the Navajo Indians. It may be proper to first give a short history of the sheep industry in the Navajo country.

Sheep were, no doubt, introduced by the Spaniards about 1629, which is the first recorded contact with these people. The tribe was an obscure and small one, ranging as semi-nomads in northern New Mexico. These people continued to raid and carry on warfare until the United States Army, under Col. Kit Carson, subjugated them by force in 1863. They were transported to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, remaining there until 1868, at which time they were returned to the region about Fort Defiance, Arizona. Their livestock had been destroyed during this period, and as they were essentially a self-supporting people the government gave to them on their return some sheep and goats. At this time there were fewer than 50,000 sheep and goats and less than 10,000 Navajos. At the present time there are over 1,500,000 sheep and goats and about 45,000 Navajos on the same area of some 15,000,000 acres. The peak of numbers was passed some years ago, according to the livestock census available.

Since 1900 great arroyos have formed, extensive areas of land have become denuded of plants, and the desirable plant cover has been greatly reduced and converted to an undesirable weed range. These evidences are easily seen by a trained observer, but to the untrained mind there seems to be no difference. The old settlers and many of the Indians state that the range is no
worse than it ever was, and that the arroyos were ever present. This is a gross fallacy on the face, since in questioning these persons it is learned that they know very little about the changes that have been taking place. The usual statement is that "there is green stuff on the ground and that is food forage." They do not recognize the plants that have no forage value and seldom those that are deleterious to stock. They also ridicule any suggestion of range improvement and control of arroyos by regulating grazing. Much of this is due to a perverted idea of sheep raising and range management.

The Navajo is generally classed as nomadic in character, but this is not true at the present time. They seldom move more than three or four times a year and then to what may be termed permanent residences. At each hogan there is a corral of sorts into which the sheep are driven every evening for safe keeping.

The sheep remain confined in these corrals until late in the morning, sometimes until noon. In fact, sheep may be seen in corrals at any time of the day. The sheep are permitted to forage and water until about noon, at which time they are returned to the corral. They remain there until three or four p.m., and then are driven out to forage for a short time. Later they are driven into the corral for confinement for the night. These corrals are in continuous use for many years. The droppings accumulate until they may become several feet in thickness. The sheep live in this filth for the greater part of their lives.
This method of close herding results in an almost complete denudation of the range for several miles about the corral. Since this procedure continues for several years, little remains in the immediate vicinity of the hogan. As there are many small herds, the average size is less than 500 sheep and goats, and in many corrals it does not take long for an area to become depleted. There are some areas unavailable until winter because of a lack of water, but these areas are all used when there is a snow fall. There is not an area, except in the more mountainous regions, that is not grazed during some part of the year.

Herding of the sheep during the limited period of grazing during the day is carried out in any manner to suit the owner. Small children, 4 to 6 years of age, may be seen with the sheep, hurriedly driving them with stones and sticks over the range. If a large band, a woman may be seen with these small children; also when they are ranging far from home. The Navajo man seldom goes without his horse, so that when a grown man is seen with the flock he is usually on horse back driving the sheep as fast as they will travel. Sheep have been driven from 30 to 40 miles in one day.

The Navajo is always suspicious of the other fellow, regardless of whom it may be; consequently the herds are small and heavy grazing is practiced. They believe, and rightly for them, that if they do not get the grass some other fellow may. Because of this characteristic they will breed their rams to several generations and then use ram lambs from these for breeding purposes. As a result the sheep have no new blood introduced and are highly inbred. This results in hairy-wool, light-weights and many off-color lambs. Some new blood has been introduced, but not a sufficient quantity to offset the strong-blooded characteristics of the native sheep. Most of the rams, old type, are lean, hairy-wooled, and usually many horned. They produce a lamb crop of about 50 percent in the best years.

Lambing season comes in early March or April in the Navajo country, although some lambs come in February. This means that the drop comes in a period of severe weather, and, as a result, there are severe losses. This is a season of great activity, which under proper methods of handling would be unnecessary. The ewes lamb with difficulty, seldom producing twins or triplets. These lambs are small and weak, and in many cases the ewe will not permit the lamb to nurse because of a scanty supply of milk. To overcome this evasion by the ewe the Navajo catches all such ewes and permits the lambs to nurse. This must be enacted every morning until weaning time and consumes much energy and labor. The cause is insufficient forage, yet the Navajo cannot see this important factor.
The resulting lambs go on the market at an average of from 50 to 55 pounds when about eight months old. These are the cream of the flock. The remaining lambs are under-weight, off-color, or hairy-wooled. Such lambs will fatten rapidly under proper feeding conditions, but this seldom occurs because the Navajo wants the same price for his cull lambs as for the fat lambs. The market cannot buy under such conditions and therefore refuses to purchase. Usually there are lambs of all ages in the flock because of the promiscuous breeding practices.

Shearing is another season of activity that is generally unnecessary. The shearing takes place in a small corral next to the main one, where a sufficient number of sheep to last a day’s or morning’s shearing are placed. The work of shearing starts with much vigor. The sheep are caught, the feet tied and the animal thrown to the ground. The shearer attacks the fleece with much energy and shortly, which may mean from ten minutes to a half hour, the fleece is taken from the animal. Ordinary sheep shears are used and upon examination these are found to be detempered, poorly ground, and generally set to pull rather than cut. This results in many flesh cuts and second cuts. Many times the wool is pulled from the sheep instead of being sheared. The fleeces, after shearing, are generally torn to pieces—these parts being thrown into a sack or a blanket with all sorts of wool and grades. The fleeces are full of sand and other trash and in some cases full of water. The wool sells for about half of what the regular market pays.

With all the industriousness attributed to the Navajo there are times when this seems to be sadly lacking. Considerable quantities of corn are raised as well as some other crops, yet with all that which they can raise and the surplus over consumption, they cannot and will not feed their sheep during a spell of hard weather or during a season of short feed. Any surplus that is raised—and this is much—goes to the trader for a small sum, then when needed the Navajo must repurchase this same corn for twice its actual value. Most of the corn fields average about 2 to 3 acres, though some fields may contain as much as 60 acres, yet the surplus goes its way and the sheep goes hungry. It is possible for these people to raise sufficient corn to feed some of their sheep for a period of the winter season or the lambing season.

Salting sheep is generally unheard of in the Navajo country. Dependence is placed upon the salt plants such as salt bush (Atriplex sp.), greasewood (Sarcobatus sp.), and such other plants as may accumulate salts in their growth. The argument presented by the Indians and some traders is that the sheep will not eat salt when offered to them. The reason for this attitude
is that the sheep do not see salt nor know what salt is in the mineral form. Thus, to obtain the necessary salt the Navajo drives his sheep for long distances at a high rate of speed, which is injurious to both sheep and range. Because of the great salt hunger the salt plants are generally damaged, and in some cases they have been found to be completely stripped of all foliage, so that in time these plants succumb from such treatment.

Goats are another important item among the Navajos that have caused much discussion. These animals are run with the sheep and are handled in the same manner. The animals being of a hardier nature can survive where a sheep would starve. Consequently they become fat and remain fat while the sheep starve and die. The sheep have eaten all of the choice vegetation and now there is nothing left but the poorest and most undesirable forage. The goat has a more depraved appetite and will eat and thrive on this poorer type of forage. The goat will produce about one pound of mohair per year, much of which is not salable. The animals cannot be sold; so it is necessary for the Indians to eat them for food. The herds average about 30 percent goats, not all of them producers of income, though they do lend some to the support of the Indians. The goat destroys range that the sheep could use to better advantage.
From this it is seen that the Navajo, although somewhat industrious, is not a sheep herder. The Navajo will only become an important sheep raiser when he conserves his energy and the range.

---

THE GHOST TREES

Down by the woodland river,
Whose mirror-glow attracts
Proud trees to pose reflected
With sunsets at their backs,

Are standing three white birches,
Aloof and strangely pale,
And shadowed in the river
With the sheen of phantom sail.

They sometimes haunt our fancy
With most unearthly tease,
Like ghosts—or is it witches
That always come in threes?

They might be mythmaids, musing
Where old gods used to fare,
Or phantom columns, lifting
From old shrines buried there;

Or maybe woodland fairies
Pretending to be trees;
But do the rustic elfins
Wear frocks below their knees?

And these are always standing
Ghost-still and gazing far
Along the paths—and sometimes
They sigh—I think they are

The ghosts of stately pine trees
That fell to common ax,
Come back to warn this forest
And haunt the woodsman’s tracks.

—Gertrude Barbrey Hays.