



# NO AMOUNT OF MONEY Grants in Action

BY STEVE WAGNER

VOLUNTEERS FIND **PERSONAL REWARDS** IN A WORK  
PROJECT INSPIRED BY DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP, BUT  
WHICH **BENEFITS ALL KINDS OF WILDLIFE.**



REPRINTED FROM  
GAME TRAILS SUMMER 2015



## NO AMOUNT OF MONEY

**D**irty, smelly and exhausted, Charlie Barnes has never been more gratified. The DSC Life Member from Trophy Club, Texas, lays down his tools, pulls off his work gloves, draws a deep breath of desert air and bellies up to a tailgate, where a troop of equally sweaty-but-satisfied volunteers is gathering around a cooler of liquid refreshment. Sipping through dry, grinning lips, they gaze upon their collective handiwork. Together, they've just finished a project that changes the landscape, both literally and figuratively, for wildlife in the arid Trans-Pecos region of west Texas.

Soon, many kinds of species will be sipping here, too. A new guzzler – a device to catch, store and dispense rainwater for thirsty critters – now stands ready for the next downpour.

Ready to help the habitat overcome its harshest limitation.

“This place has everything it needs to be great habitat for wildlife, except for water, and we just solved that problem,” says Barnes. “Building a guzzler is doing something good for the future, and there’s no amount of money that could replace what I get out of being a part of it.”

He explains, “I’m a member of 11 different conservation groups and I volunteer for a multitude of tasks. I help raise money, organize banquets and serve on committees and boards. I even help run the DSC store each year at the DSC Convention. And that’s all good. But it’s a totally different thing to be part of boots-on-the-ground conservation work. Your appreciation for wildlife and your role in stewardship changes exponentially and forever. The feeling you have when you drive away from a project like this, knowing that you’ve helped make a meaningful difference, can’t be explained with words.”

### Into the Desert

In late March, Barnes and some 120 other conservation devotees volunteered for a special work weekend at the El Carmen Land and Conservation Co., formerly known as the Adams Ranch.

A spectacular setting in full blossom from recent rains, the ranch is owned by CEMEX USA and Cuenca Los Ojos Foundation. The property fronts along the Rio Grande for more than seven miles. Across the river is a 400,000-acre conservation area owned by CEMEX Mexico, which features the rugged Sierra del Carmen range and its 9,000-foot peaks. Bordering on the south is Big Bend National Park. To the north is Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s Black Gap WMA. The location is considered a vital migration and dispersal corridor for many species of



*This Reservoir stores rainwater for the dry season.*



*Bighorns in Mexico and Texas benefit from this project.*



birds and several native mammals including black bear, mule deer and desert bighorn sheep.

This last species is the one that actually inspired the guzzler project.

Bighorns have always used the area. Ancient pictographs found on cave walls at the ranch show prehistoric hunters pursuing curly-horned game. But the past few years have seen drought so severe, even some of the prickly pear and cholla have perished. Guzzlers won’t help the cacti, but they’ll definitely help the wildlife trying to scratch out a living here. By making the habitat a bit more resistant to extreme dryness, sheep populations can more easily expand, migrate and genetically mingle.

A landscape with improved habitat also could be a release site for a future relocation project. Several years ago, Texas Parks and Wildlife moved bighorns to the Adams Ranch from Elephant Mountain WMA, some 60 miles to the west. However, it wasn’t long before many of those animals showed up right back where they started.

Interestingly, biologists say that move and cross-country trek appeared to kindle a migratory instinct that had been previously subdued. Some of the sheep that returned to Elephant Mountain began regular sorties across the region. A few even looped back through the Adams Ranch.

It's these wandering bighorns, as well as the potential for a year-round resident herd at the ranch, which seeded an alliance between El Carmen Land and Conservation Co. and the Texas Bighorn Society (TBS).

TBS was founded in 1981 specifically to augment the sheep restoration efforts of Texas Parks and Wildlife. The species had been extirpated in the state since the 1960s. Over the years, reintroduction efforts had not gone well. Budgets were tight and relocating sheep was expensive. The agency was considering waving a white flag over the entire program. But TBS refused to let that happen. Volunteers went to work raising money, lobbying for support, enlisting partners and contributing member time and talent for a variety of on-the-ground projects. Long story short, Texas now has a healthy desert bighorn population of about 1,500 animals.

Give DSC a pat on the back. Over the past 10 years, DSC has granted \$73,500 for desert bighorn projects in Texas. Much of that funding has gone to TBS.

In 2013, TBS used a DSC grant to help organize volunteer construction of two guzzlers and two supplemental water catchment devices at the Adams Ranch. Other conservation outfits got in on the act. The Mule Deer Foundation and Quail Coalition (with additional funding from DSC) added even more wildlife watering holes to the parched landscape.

All of which led to the massive work weekend this past March. In a span of just 48 hours, volunteer manpower was responsible for three new guzzlers at the ranch, plus repair and maintenance on two existing ones at neighboring Black Gap WMA.

One of the new guzzlers was dedicated to DSC. A bronze plaque recognizes the club's partnership with TBS for the betterment of habitat not only for sheep but for all wildlife.

## Engineering Survival

A guzzler is a monument to common-sense engineering, but there are important nuances in construction, materials and location.

Biologists with El Carmen Land and Conservation Co. selected guzzler sites at the base of steep ridges, near the mouths of canyons or breaks where sheep are likely to travel to and from the valley below. A good location offers clear access, visibility against cougars and other predators and quick escape routes back to the high country.

Construction begins with a raised platform made of a welded steel frame covered with sheet metal (which sheep sometimes use for shade). The entire structure is anchored with steel fence posts drilled and driven into the ground at different angles, then welded to the frame. Rainwater drains to a gutter in the center of the platform. Gravity carries the water through a pipe to two plastic holding tanks. Smaller lines feed out from the tanks and run downhill to the actual drinkers. A valve, which looks and works exactly like a floating ball valve in a toilet, keeps the water level steady in a drinker.

Through the years, TBS members have learned to use tanks made of black plastic, rather than clear, because they discourage algae and simply last longer in the unrelenting UV of desert sun. Trial and error led to the discovery that certain kinds of poly pipe discourage chewing bears, and covering the lines with heavy rocks helps, too.

One inch of rain falling on a 24x24-foot platform equates to 359 gallons of water in the tanks. Ten inches of rain – about average for this elevation in this part of the Chihuahuan Desert – would fill the two 2,500-gallon tanks to about 60-percent capacity.

El Carmen Land and Conservation Co. biologists say two full tanks will provide wildlife with water for a full year, even if it doesn't rain again. In years past, TBS used mules and helicopters to build guzzlers on mountaintops and other remote locations. However, part of the beauty of those built in 2015 is their road-accessibility for water trucks. The rain is appreciated but not required.

## Nothing to Receive

One of the myths perpetuated by anti-hunters and animal rights activists is that the sporting community is only interested in conservation if it results in more stuff to kill. Those critics would have been disappointed by what they saw at this project.

True, desert bighorns are a game species and a limited number of hunting permits are offered through auction, landowner sale, drawing and lottery. But the dollars it takes to buy one are astronomical. And the odds of randomly pulling one are infinitesimal.



*Proud of what they have accomplished, the volunteers gather for one last look at their work.*



“Most of these volunteers come here knowing full well that they’ll never hunt a sheep,” says Barnes. “We have people from all walks of life, TBS members, DSC members, all income levels, all age groups. Out of those 120 people, I’d say seven to eight could actually afford a sheep hunt. Only a few have actually done it. It’s clear to me that we’re all motivated by the simple fact that this is something that needs doing. There’s nothing for us to receive. It’s just the right thing to do.”

Barnes added that participants also enjoy the camaraderie.

“It feels like a reunion. We’re not a bunch of random people. We’re a family coming together for something bigger than ourselves. It’s incredible to be a part of it,” he says.

Family. Friends. Fellowship. Values. Fun. Stewardship. And the shared vision of wild creatures – mammals, birds, insects and reptiles – sipping liquid refreshment and thriving in a land where merely surviving was once against the odds. That sounds gratifying no matter how dirty, smelly and exhausted you may be. **GT**

For more information about grants awarded by DSC, visit [www.biggame.org](http://www.biggame.org).

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