



After GPS coordinates helped me get to the area, a trail of blood, fur, flies, and scent led me to the sheep who had been “removed.”

As an artist-in-residence at Badlands National Park, I asked everyone I met if they knew of any dead animals for me to photograph and write about, as is my craft. Finally, I got an email with three sets of numbers: coordinates to bighorn sheep that park rangers had killed. Having no natural predators of adults, these animals were instead prey to a conservation tactic: “test-and-remove.”

I set out twice: Once with the other artist in residence, who could hike faster than I, but who balked at the danger as we climbed up and down the dry, crumbling formations. I returned to the wildlife officers and asked for more specific directions, and they pinned a location on my OnX app to show where I needed to enter the draw so that I wouldn’t have to climb up and down 75-degree slopes. I’d done that before, needing to maintain three points of contact during the entire trip as the off-white stones seemed to turn to marbles under my feet.



Though the park officers insisted I needed a hiking buddy, the other resident didn't want to return, so I went alone the second time. I only saw one other person that day, about a hundred metres from the parking lot. He held up his binoculars cordially and said the birds were out; I told him I was out searching for dead sheep. He tilted his head awkwardly and wished me luck.

Conservation isn't easy or simple, and sometimes, it's disturbing. When I searched online for more information about the test-and-remove program, I didn't find any official documentation of it being used in this park. That's natural, I suppose. No need to advertise something so bloody. When I had worked at a state park, my manager had said that I didn't

need to lie to guests, but I shouldn't bring up the fact that the rangers killed the park pigs. Still, test-and-remove is one of the more agreeable types of "culls," outside of the kind that simply refers to moving or sterilizing an animal so it won't keep breeding in the area. In this case, the sheep cull *is* fatal, but it's done to protect the herd: wildlife officers only kill the bighorns once they've tested positive multiple times for *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (Movi), which causes pneumonia. It's especially deadly to lambs; one year, the entire crop of young ones died. Over a few years, the park went from over 300 animals to under 50. By killing off the infected, they hope to eliminate the disease before the disease eliminates the sheep.

The rest of the day was just me and the Martian landscape. I located the correct entrance to the draw, dry buffalo grass scratching my ankles, and proceeded onto the dry mud. Deer and bighorn tracks pressed into the mud, next to each other as though inviting me to compare their double-almond shapes. This would be critical later.

I pressed on, walking slowly so as to carefully calculate where I could step safely, whether I remained in the correct draw, and to, perhaps, find fossils. Soon, I looked down next to my foot and found the jaw of a 32-million-year-old relative of a rhino: a subhyracodon, a park paleontologist would later suggest when I showed him the picture. Paleontologists don't see bones as a reason to be sad that an animal died: they are usually more excited to see that it had lived.



The draw narrowed into a ravine and then a creek bed. I frequently skittered up and down the sides of the trail, trying to decide whether the safety of the creek bed—low enough that

there was nowhere to fall if I slipped—was worth the squeeze. Sometimes I had to turn sideways, and I applauded the two men with guns and packs who had apparently made their way in just fine.

Soon, though, the coordinates got fuzzy, and I had to pray I could find the animals. As a wanderer of the plains, I can often spot large carcasses 200 metres away or more. But here, every eye is pressed against formations; the sheep could be within smelling distance but blocked by a wall of vertical earth.

Inside one of the ravines, tacky crimson clung to parts of the walls, writing a story of something falling, bouncing, and leaving blood on each space where it had made contact. The blood path terminated in the water, but the bodies weren't there.

Finally, a grassy shelf emerged, and lying on top, I spotted sheets of patchy brownish grey hair. Moving closer revealed my target: two lambs, opened as though in offering to the sky and its winged friends. Exposed yet ignored, the remains were laid bare in the centre of dusty cathedral spires.



Blood pooled so full inside a cavity that it would have made a swimming pool for a brave kangaroo mouse. The collars and heads were gone, taken by the resource officers. I got my trophy – some photos and video.

I continued up the creek bed to find the third and final animal. I was both grateful and concerned for my solitude; the creek was so narrow and unpopulated by humans, I was certain no one would find or hear me if I had needed help. But, by the same token, I knew that few who would accompany on a hike would suffer such a non-trail trail. I would have had to turn back had I brought anyone with me.

Finally, I saw the signs. Tufts of greyish hair. Thick blood and flesh dotting the rocks. Flies, awoken to a rare feast. I turned a corner, squeezing my body between the scratching walls, with only the steep sides of the earth to press my feet into, and I finally saw it.

Briefly, I was disappointed, thinking I had only found a deer. The ashen fur and the white rump looked cervine to me, and the lack of a head didn't help.

Then, thankfully, I looked closely at the dark hooves jutting from the pile of flesh. Deer hooves look similar, but they are in fact more slender than those of a bighorn. The size confirmed it: I had found the third caprine carcass. The trinity was complete.

The organs seemed to have been claimed as well, and the ribcage shone with blood in saturated red, even in the shade of the canyon. Even after days of drying, oxidizing. Waiting. These photos would be her only resurrection.



I wish I could have explained to the sheep why the wildlife officers had to “remove” them, or rather, remove their souls. It wasn’t to be eaten by a carnivore, though I’m sure the ones left on the landscape fulfilled that purpose as well. But they had to die because their test results proved that they had maintained the virus that would have killed them anyway, plus any sheep they would spread it to in their lives.

I met up with the wildlife officers as they performed a necropsy on another ewe. Her body lay out on a dusty wooden table in a shelter behind a facility. From the swell of her belly and teats, I knew there was an undelivered sheep inside.

“Are you sure? It’s not a pretty sight,” a resource officer had told me when I asked about watching a necropsy. Patiently, I explained that a sheep necropsy couldn’t be worse than the ones I had attended before: a dolphin and two otters. I had even done something of the sort myself, “processing” a dog and two puppies who had died of unknown causes and given to me by a breeder. I got them from whole to bones, touching and cutting every part of them. I had even done a pet cat, just as cute and stripey as my own.

The experience of cutting up a pregnant ewe was both scientific and reverent. I suspect that, with the camera rolling, it might have been unwise to crack too many jokes, as that might paint the experience as something they’d want to do more often. I don’t mind dark humor, but I notice when people act as though the individual was nothing but an object standing in the way of a goal. I notice when people dodge my questions about the method and reason for killing an animal, huffing that they’re heroes for taking a soul: “It’s natural, so it’s good for the environment.”

The test-and-remove program has a lot more justification than a furrier simply insisting that the product they sell must be sustainable. There are actual studies and seminars with experts and unbiased organizations that support test-and-remove, and consideration of the loss of life is not ignored. The analysis focuses on maintaining the long-term population, funding, and even the ethical cost of killing a mammal and throwing most of it away. In various industries surrounding animal products, the primary concerns are profit and defending said profit.

As one officer skinned the ewe, another pulled hair from her back for a sample bag. “Oh, shit,” he said. “I forgot you’re gonna donate the pelt.”

Tufts of fur wafted to the floor as they skinned her; next time they’ll collect from that, or from the head or legs – anything that wasn’t likely to become part of a ceremonial item. The hide would go to the local Sioux tribe. One investigated the body for parts, cutting pieces of organs out to put in the labeled plastic bags held by the other. For testing, they explained, and for archiving.



The bag of my concern, of course, was the swollen uterus. One worker pulled the organ from the sheep, then pulled a sheep from the organ. A baby. Less than a baby. The unborn. For the first time in the light of day, unseeing. For the first time in the icy prairie air, but unfeeling.



We loaded the leftovers into the bed of the truck, and the three of us headed out to the dump site. The officers carried the body to the edge of the field and threw it into a draw, tossing a bucket of blood and organs after it. I set up a trail cam and later returned to find crows, magpies, and a badger had enjoyed the remains. Fortunately, the respiratory disease does not appear to be contagious to non-sheep, nor is it spread postmortem.



When I tell people that I write about, photograph, and make videos about animal remains, I notice that frequently people ask if I'm talking about roadkill. Sometimes they mention a friend or an artist they know online who did a photo series featuring roadkill. Roadkill is certainly fascinating, but I can't help but notice there aren't many photo series featuring carcasses found more than ten metres from a road. Roadkill might be the first type of carcass you think of as it might be the most common you see – outside of what's on your dinner plate, likely.

You don't have to go miles into the body-crushing waves of Oligocene stone to see roadkill. You don't have to gain the privilege of access through a particular program, nor insist to men that, *yes, I do want to see it*. Most of the bighorn sheep who were killed through test-and-remove programs will never be seen by anyone except those working directly in the park. It's too weird. Too creepy. They don't want pictures of guts and goo, the soft yellow hooves on the fetus of an innocent casualty, and I get it. They want the sunset and the night sky, formations silhouetted in front like angels judging from on high.

But I want to see those who were taken. I want to bring their stories out of the shadow of the canyon, show the lamb's blood spilled for the greater good. And, one day, when the disease is fully eradicated, and the sheep can roam and play without fear, I'll think back on the ewes and lambs who were sacrificed to protect their kind.