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# A Quandary in Restoring Bald Eagle Populations

By **HENRY FOUNTAIN**

For three decades, scientists have been trying with only limited success to re-establish breeding populations of bald eagles on the Channel Islands off the Southern California coast. The eagles disappeared from the islands in the 1960s, victims, like many other birds, of DDT, which affected their ability to reproduce.

But a new study suggests that conservationists should tread carefully. Restored eagle populations may have considerable impact on other animals on the islands.

By excavating an old nest on one of the islands for remnants of prey, and through isotopic analysis of feather and bone from museum specimens, Seth D. Newsome, now at the [University of Wyoming](#), and colleagues reconstructed the diet of Channel Island bald eagles over time. Their findings are reported in [The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).

The work showed that for thousands of years before about 1800 (when nonnative Americans first came to the islands), the eagles' diet consisted mostly of seabirds. But when sheep ranching was established in the mid-19th century, the diet changed, largely to sheep carcasses. "Sheep were the most common, abundant prey source," Dr. Newsome said.

There are no more sheep on the islands, so if bald eagle populations were to recover, they would have to seek other prey. Dr. Newsome said prey sources might include sea lion carcasses — the islands are home to tens of thousands of these marine mammals — or seabirds. Both are potentially problematic, the seabirds because their populations have also declined and are now recovering, and the sea lions because they would pass on accumulated contaminants and pollutants (including, even now, DDT) in their tissues.

The study, Dr. Newsome said, "raises a flag for ongoing efforts to restore a stable and breeding bald eagle population out there."