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Research shows guard dogs relax sheep

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Sheep tend to travel greater distances in the presence of a guard dog, likely because they're less concerned about predators, according to new research led by Idaho State University (ISU).

Bryson Webber, a graduate student in ISU's Geographic Information Science (GIS) department who analyzed the data, said the study affirms the importance of guard dogs because stressed sheep tend to gain less weight. Previous sheep dog studies have focused on mortality linked to predation; Webber is unaware of any other studies done about how dogs affect sheep behavior.



"We don't always have to remove predators," Webber said. "With this, hopefully we can show that the lifestyle improves with the guardian dogs being present. That equates to larger income for the ranchers."

The data was collected during a 16-day period in the spring of 2010. Oregon State University supplied global positioning system collars to record the elevation, location and velocity of the sheep every second. Webber plotted the data with mapping software to depict movement. Students with the ISU GIS club volunteered to observe the behavior of the sheep.

The U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho, provided the livestock and the four expansive pastures utilized for the study.

The study tracked herds of sheep accustomed to predators. Half of the sheep were left alone and half were guarded. The guarded flocks were switched, and the process was repeated. Though the guarded flocks were more at ease to travel farther, Webber noticed no difference in speed.

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