



Update

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Greetings Friends of Grizzly Bears and Happy Thanksgiving!

The opinion piece below, which I wrote, ran yesterday in the Idaho State Journal.

I don't think that IFG is going to take this lying down, especially since Gregg Losinski has been super aggressive for state management for years.

So, depending on what happens, I may need backup - LTEs, comments, etc.

https://idahostatejournal.com/opinion/columns/grizzly-bear-deaths-raise-questions-about-delisting/article_4a45c832-6d62-5211-a259-a3d4b39fb8dc.html

IDAHO STATE JOURNAL

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Grizzly bear deaths raise questions about delisting

By Louisa Willcox

With the recent cold snap, some Yellowstone grizzly bears are slowing down — but it will still be another week or more before they are snug in dens and out of harms' way for the winter. In a disturbing trend, this year the bear body count continues to mount at a time when the population has been, by weight of evidence, declining. This problem will likely worsen with the federal government's decision last spring to strip endangered species protections from Yellowstone's grizzly bears and give management authority to the states ("delist").

Here, as elsewhere in the lower-48 states, government scientists have found that most grizzly bears die from human causes. This year is no exception. Only three of the 51 recorded grizzly bear deaths may be from natural causes.

And the rate of killing is shocking — one bear approximately every two days since hunting season began in October. Never have so many bear deaths been investigated for possible foul play in one year — 26 bears and counting, more than half of all known deaths.

Applying an official estimator that accounts for unknown mortality, about 77 bears are dead, or more than 11 percent of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population of approximately 690 grizzlies occupying the Demographic Monitoring Area (DMA), the core of grizzly habitat.

Government officials have shrugged off the problem, claiming that population estimates are biased low, while failing to admit that, by their own reckoning, bear mortalities are also underestimated.

This year's deaths call into question the wisdom of delisting and legalizing a bear trophy hunt. In fact, managers in the states of Idaho, Wyoming and Montana seem to be acting as if it is already open season on grizzly bears. Indeed, if just three more grizzlies are killed inside the DMA, this year will surpass the record

number of bear deaths that occurred during 2015. That year, grizzly bear deaths by all causes were far higher than any since 1959, when data on mortalities started to be compiled.

Making matters worse, according to public assertions and post-delisting agreements mandated by state managers, several hundred bears could be killed within the next few years as part of deliberate efforts to reduce numbers of grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, potentially to critically low levels.

The government's own data puts the lie to claims by state managers that Yellowstone's grizzly bear population can absorb the high levels of mortality that we've seen during recent years. The population is no longer growing, and more likely has been declining since at least 2007, and more precipitously since 2015. This trend has been driven by drought and the loss of two formerly important native grizzly bear foods, cutthroat trout and whitebark pine.

Bears have compensated partly by eating more meat, mostly from cows and hunter-killed big game, which is drawing them into more conflicts with ranchers and hunters. Today these are the leading causes of grizzly bear mortalities — not garbage and human attractants as was the case several decades ago. If the states proceed with a bear sport hunt next spring, as is now permitted, the number of grizzly bear deaths could climb even more.

The government has long recognized that most bear-human conflicts are avoidable. The solutions are not rocket science. They include paying attention and being prepared to encounter bears in the backcountry. Keeping clean camps. Removing dead game from the field promptly. And carrying pepper spray — which has saved the lives of numerous hunters, including several this fall.

These are but a few of the tools of coexistence. A somewhat different suite of practices can deter livestock conflicts. These include electric fence around calving areas, the use of livestock guardian dogs, removing and composting dead livestock, and nighttime penning.

But our choice to use them rather than bullets depends on the stories we choose to tell ourselves about our place in the world, as well as that of wild animals such as grizzlies.

One story, embodied in the management of our national parks, is about respect and reverence for the wild. Indeed, more and more families are flocking to Yellowstone each summer — and at the top of the viewing wish list is a grizzly bear. Park officials are bending over backwards to make sure that viewing is safe and that visitors do not leave out garbage that could food-condition bears — a habit that often leads to unnecessary conflicts.

The increase in park visitation is matched by human population growth in communities around Yellowstone. People are moving in ever greater numbers to the region for its stunning mountains, clean air and rivers, and abundant wildlife. The engine driving today's economy is the quality of our environment — not ranching or extractive industries like mining and logging, which are rooted in an ethos of dominating nature.

But a drive to subjugate the wild continues to shape wildlife management in western states. Here, wildlife management is still organized around killing large carnivores to presumably increase the "harvestable surplus" of elk, deer, and other large herbivores. More to the point, wildlife managers in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana are locked down in service of a politically influential minority who place top priority on opportunities to hunt big game. The interests of outdoor enthusiasts who prize anything other than hunting are not represented on game commissions or among leaders of the state wildlife management agencies.

State managers commonly see large carnivores as competitors for big game hunting licenses, which are their figurative cash cow — despite the fact that ample research has shown that carnivores rarely harm big game populations — whereas plenty shows that excessive hunting by humans does have major negative impacts, along with climate change and drought.

Nonetheless, sport hunting has been used during recent decades by state managers to depress populations of mountain lions and wolves, and accounts for approximately 70 to 80 percent of adult carnivore deaths in the Northern Rockies. Without the constraints of the Endangered Species Act, state managers are poised to treat grizzly bears as they do other large carnivores.

Hunting and increased killing will complicate if not altogether prevent connectivity between grizzly bear ecosystems in the northern Rockies, which scientists deem essential to ensuring the health of Yellowstone's long-isolated bears. Even under the best of circumstances, colonization of new habitats is difficult for grizzlies

given their low reproductive rates and the tendency of females to stay in or near their mothers' range. By contrast, wolves and mountain lions reproduce at comparatively high rates, and readily colonize areas hundreds of miles away.

For these and other reasons, grizzly bears will be acutely vulnerable to the effects of sport hunting. Moreover, the first bears to be killed will likely be those on the periphery best positioned to connect with other bear populations. And, popular bears that frequent roads inside national parks, where hunting is not allowed, could be killed when they range outside park jurisdictions where hunting is permitted. In fact, state officials have refused to ban hunting on lands frequented by these tolerant bears or in connecting landscapes.

One big problem with the plans of state agencies to manage grizzly bears after delisting is that they lack binding commitments to do anything precautionary. Despite some laudatory language on coexistence, everything is discretionary.

Another major problem is the lack of any enforceable limits on grizzly bear mortality. What will happen if grizzly bear deaths exceed sustainable levels? Post-delisting plans and agreements do not compel any response. Moreover, state laws don't limit but rather promote killing grizzly bears.

In short, nothing in state management is about compassion for grizzly bears. The fact that there is little free board and much uncertainty regarding the size of the population exacerbates the problem. Current litigation to contest delisting is, at its root, about which story will now dominate management of grizzlies in one of their last strongholds south of Canada: control and violence, or coexistence and reverence. On one side are conservationists and Native Americans, who see the grizzly as a relative. On the other are managers who cling to an ethos of domination and death.

Today, we have the power of life and death over the Great Bear in the last 1 percent of the lands where it survives in the lower-48 states. If unchecked, a relatively few armed and hostile people, aided by state governments, could undo decades of conservation efforts that have brought Yellowstone's grizzly bears back from the brink of extinction. The interests of the 99 percent of people in this country who want to see bears alive and flourishing around the nation's oldest park could be sacrificed for the benefit of a small minority.

Those concerned about the fate of grizzly bears should be worried about delisting, and more broadly, about the extent to which our wildlife management agencies deliberately disenfranchise most people in this country. In the end, the debate about delisting is about the health of our democracy and the relationship we choose with an animal that epitomizes the wildest nature we have left.

Working for Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity and Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Louisa Willcox of Livingston, Montana, has advocated for grizzly bear preservation for over 30 years. She specializes in developing comprehensive strategies that succeed because they work on multiple scales using various approaches, including grassroots organizing and outreach, education, media and communication, policy analysis, lobbying, coalition development, and public protest. She and a handful of others have prevented Yellowstone grizzly bear delisting for over two decades. Willcox has a bachelor's degree from Williams College and a master's degree in forest policy from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. In 2014, she was given a lifetime achievement award from Yale.