

Interview with Casey Anderson
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Louisa Willcox, Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox and welcome to The Grizzly Beat. We have with us here today Casey Anderson, who's a naturalist, a filmmaker and founder of a grizzly bear sanctuary in Bozeman Montana. Casey, you've raised a number of grizzly bears including Brutus, who's active in movies. How did you get started in that work and what's it like for you?

Casey Anderson: I knew since I was a kid growing up in Montana that I wanted to work with animals and I really didn't know what that meant. I went off to college to study wildlife biology and during the summer months I started working basically shoveling poop at captive wildlife facilities, and it was a job that got me close to animals and that was really kind of the budding thing of how I started raising grizzly bears and being around grizzly bears in captivity amongst a lot of other North American predators. And I was young man and it was really cool because I was going out in the wild, and having my experiences in the wild that I had with my dad running around Montana and seeing these wild animals. But then studying them at school, getting into the science, and then getting right up close and getting hands on, and smelling them and watching them move, and having this kind of opportunity to witness them in a different way. And taking all those three kind of ingredients, it was fascinating, because there were things I didn't know, and there were things I was learning by being around these animals in close proximity that was translating into when I would venture back out into the wild.

And with grizzly bears particularly it was just really apparent from the get-go, when I was 18 years old, that there was more from them. You can see them thinking. They have such distinct individual personalities. And that was something about being around bears and raising them that was really fascinating to me, because they were such characters. And then again, going back in the wild and looking at them a little differently, and seeing that those exact varied amounts of character exist out there amongst the grizzly bears -- and the biggest character of all bears that I've ever encountered is Brutus, a little bear cub that was born at a wildlife park that I was consulting at, unfortunately kind of horrible situation. They were overpopulated.

People who come to wildlife parks, they want to see little baby bears, they want to see big adult bears, but they don't want to see like awkward teenage bears, so since they were kind of saturation of the population, they had a policy which is legal to this day with captive animals, that they would euthanize the cubs at the end of the year to keep the population the same. And at that point I realized I didn't want to be a part of that world anymore. That was really what triggered Montana Grizzly Encounter, the sanctuary that we started, was this little bear Brutus, who's the little cub that was going to be euthanized. There's no way I could have let it happen, because he just had this innate charm and charisma that was just bigger than anything I've ever seen, and it just struck me so hard. I knew there was a reason why this bear needed to live, beyond anything that I could even think of at the moment. And I knew that it was just a burning thing and

passion in my soul that I had to do that. And yeah, I got backers to fund the beginning of the sanctuary, and Brutus was our first little bear that we rescued.

And it's crazy -- you know here I am out at that point, I was 26 years old, and you watch Grizzly Adams, and you see all these shows, but really you don't think about what it takes to raise a grizzly bear. This little cub couldn't be with its mother, so we stepped in as its mother and a very strong bond forms. I would say that grizzly bears cubs and their mother have some of the strongest bonds out in the wild world, and that same bond formed with me and a gal named Amy who raised him together.

And I like to say there's no book, you can't go buy a book about how to raise a grizzly bear. So it's really kind of, you just get thrown in there, and you just try to figure it out. Two animals that are not supposed to be together -- grizzly bears and humans at some level -- trying to figure out how they're going to live together for the rest of their life.

GT: So you and Brutus have been through thick and thin together and he's now a huge bear, like 900 pounds or so. What has your relationship with Brutus given you? What has he taught you?

CA: He's taught me so much. He continues to. He's 14 and in those 14 years he's changed and evolved and I got to be a part of that, but I think that what exactly you're asking is that he's allowed me to evolve and perceive things in such a different way. He's turned me into this massive hypocrite. I've now become anti-captive wildlife. I don't believe animals should be in captivity, and here I am with a grizzly bear that I've raised since 14 in a sanctuary, who will never be able to go out into the wild. And since I've been able to be so close to him, he's shown me who he is and who grizzly bears are, and who wild animals can be, and the value of that. And it's really the fuel, the passion that drives me to tell stories, to share this story that he's telling me with the rest of the world. And I really believe that animals would have a place out in the wild and would be able to be only in the wild if people knew who they were -- and realized how much depth and emotion and thought and intelligence and individual personalities for a lack of better term, that these animals have. If they could see that value and that depth in these animals, they would make decisions differently than they are now.

GT: How would you describe Brutus's personality? We were talking about how different they are from each other and you have other grizzly bears as well. How would you describe Brutus's personality?

C: The best way, it's one I kind of go back to once in a while, he's kind of like this laid back, like chilled out surfer. He's like "the dude". He's like "the dude" of the grizzly bears, he really is. His tolerance and patience with us as humans, and how awkward we can be, with body language and miscommunication in that realm. He's just so tolerant and patient and forgiving. In that, he also has this, like, magnetism about him and charm that is, it's funny you know.

People hear that, for example, we're going to do a TV shoot with him and some crew from LA shows up and they're like, they look on the call sheet and say, "we're going to be around a 900 lb grizzly bear today," and they're saying, "I don't even want to go to work today, I'm terrified. Haven't you heard what grizzly bears do? I read them headlines the other day, they maul people all the time." And they don't even want to be at work. It's a safety thing. If there's crew around I'm like, "Brutus is going to come out, don't try to touch him, don't try to hug him," and they'll look at me like I'm nuts. "I'm not going to try to touch him or hug him, I don't even want to be here," and then as soon as he comes out, that wall and that barrier that everybody has of fear -- "bear-anoxia" I like to call it -- that's instilled by media, mostly inside of us all, I watch him melt it and tear it down, just in his own way. He looks at people in the eyes, the way he carries himself and his body language, he has this ease about him, which can be dangerous, because I still don't want people to go up and have them pat him and touch him and hug him. I see these same people who were shaking just minutes before go, "oh, you're so beautiful Brutus," - - "hey Casey, can I touch him?" and I'm like: "no". But the value of just that in him and the way he can pull that wall down is really important in our collaborative effort to change peoples' minds. Cause they do, they can look at him and see that he's much more than the same animal they read about two days ago on the headlines.

GT: Does he have that effect on other bears? I read that you had a cub from Alaska, an orphan cub, and she was pretty freaked out when she arrived. Does he have kind of the calming effect when on other bears that come in?

CA: Absolutely. He really does. When we introduced the little cub a few months ago, she's quite small, and we are always concerned just about the size of the two bears coming together -- just don't want her to get hurt. And he instantaneously recognized her anxiety, and he basically reacted to that by not walking at her but kind of stepping back and sitting down and going into a submissive kind of a posture, and even not making eye contact and looking to the side, and kind of playing with the grass to bring her in closer, to ease her anxiety and eventually that's exactly what happened. They were within an hour rolling around in the grass playing. He's one of the only bears that I've ever watched do that both in the wild and in captivity.

You will see it once in a while in the wild, where during the mating season, where you'll see these big males just patiently following around these females, and they'll do a lot of the same thing. They'll kind of lay there and play with their toes and act like cubs again, just to get her close enough so that there can be cubs the next season.

GT: Right. Has he ever kind of surprised you? You've obviously had a very, very close relationship with him his whole life. Where he's read a situation or read your mood and surprised you with his level of understanding or his reaction to a situation?

CA: Yeah, I mean in several ways. I could probably go on and on about that, but his intelligent-wise, and watching them kind of connect the dots -- and dots that we would think were too far apart for a bear to figure out. In the sanctuary we have this pond that's fed by a waterfall. And the water circulates, goes down into the pond, down through a

drain into this pump, and then the pump pumps it back over the waterfall. Well if the flow of water stops, the pump will pump the tank empty, and then the flow in the pump will turn the pump off. So he's figured out where if he goes over and puts his paws on the drain, he can turn the waterfall off, if he holds it there a long enough. And as soon as he does that, any other bear that's in the sanctuary becomes curious about the spot behind the waterfall that really never -- they've really never had access to. And they'll go over and sniff around. Well he will purposely wait for them to go over there and take his paws off -- and you see this sense of humor and it's the only way I could describe it -- maybe that's too much -- but he at least creating this excitement, this body language in this other bear, that is stimulating to him, and you realize how he connects the dots to do so.

When you see an animal doing that and purposely, it's mind blowing. You think about -- and this is just something that is so obvious to me -- but there's got to be all sorts of these intricacies happening all the time within him, with any other bear sanctuary, with every bear in the world. Again it's just without seeing that, you would never think it would happen.

GT: Similarly, I was wondering if you have had situations where maybe you were or one of your coworkers wasn't feeling well one day or something sort of bad happened, or somebody in your family was sick or died, and where the bear was picking up on that, and is responding to you in some way?

CA: Yeah, that's definitely happens a lot with Brutus, and kind of in that same kind of accepting, patient, the "dude" kind of personality that he has. He is always been around people his entire life, and he has learned to read human body language and intonation of the voice -- as much as we have learned to read his body language and what he's trying to tell us, at a very intricate level. And there's been several times, and I could think of a couple times, where I've been deeply upset and he obviously recognizes it.

You can see this, like, relaxation in his face and the way he holds himself and moves. He becomes almost somber. He feels that emotion or that whatever I'm projecting to him through body language. Just the vibe. When I use the word "vibe" it sounds a little out there, but there's something. Whatever it is, he can see it and feel it. Yes, he's so in tune. Animals are so in tune to that. It's how they survive. Yeah, he recognizes it and particularly with people he cares about. When I say care, again, if you want to look at it as black and white as possible, people that he's paying attention to all the time. He's looking at and reading their body language. He changes his mood accordingly. And when we do work with him we always have that in mind. If I'm in a bad mood, I'm grumpy, I just refuse to work with him. I don't want to translate that into him somehow and usually if I'm grumpy, he doesn't want to be anywhere near me, as most of my friends don't.

GT: Have you or any of your coworkers had any regrettable moments, where the bear might have been in a bad mood or maybe wasn't feeling well and hurt somebody?

CA: Fortunately nobody's been hurt by any of the bears at our sanctuary. I'm definitely been around other situations at other places. I think one of the greatest kind of rules that

we have is that the bears are the boss. And we don't put them in situations that they're uncomfortable. We don't make a living by making the bears do anything. We don't want to. Any time that I feel like I've crossed that line where I've created a situation where maybe Brutus would have not done it that way on his own, it makes you feel awful. So, we really, really try to assess the bear's needs and wants. And I don't care if a Hollywood producer wants to spend a half a million dollars and do some big movie. If Brutus doesn't feel like doing something, we're not doing it. That's just it. We just don't, we won't cross that line. It's not worth it. Even if we make the mistake or somebody else makes the mistake, Brutus is going to pay the price for that, and I have the responsibility to make sure that never happens.

And I think one of the biggest parts of that responsibility is, as I've changed my perception about bears -- and I find it so important to pass that on to everybody -- if I then go get hurt by a bear or you read about me in the headlines down the line, everything I say goes away. Everything is completely not true anymore. So I have to make sure that doesn't happen. Part of respecting Brutus and all the bears in the sanctuary and the bears in the wild is to make sure that you understand them and respect them.

GT: So your sanctuary Grizzly Encounter is a lot about education. What do you hope people will take away with from meeting your bears and hearing your message?

CA: The location is great because anybody's who's driving by the sanctuary or lives around the sanctuary are traveling through or living in grizzly bear country. And the misconceptions about grizzly bears are everywhere, what people perceive these animals as. Most of our bears are bears that come from pretty horrible situations whether they've lived in circus roll cages for 18 years or have been orphaned and starving to death in Alaska. We're proud of when you come in -- what you will see is happy bears playing and enjoying their life that they have -- the limited life that they have in captivity.

And we have an extensive educational program. Anything you want to know about a grizzly bear is there. But mostly I think it's just giving people in there to see these animals up close, and see them interact, and see their happiness, and see some elements of this intelligence and emotion that I'm touching on, and changing their perceptions. And simultaneously teaching them some facts, and what they can do when they're out in grizzly country. And I think it is two-fold: arming them with knowledge about these animals and understanding from even a scientific level, but also changing their perceptions about who these animals are that they share the landscape with.

GT: So on that note, you read a lot about controlling grizzly bears and managing grizzly bears. And the government's approach is so often to radio collar them and follow them around. And taking this idea of management and control through research, you've been critical of some of that work, that make sweeping generalizations about all grizzly bears gained from radio collar work. Can you explain some of your concerns?

CA: I definitely see the value in radio collaring and the learning about the movements of bears in a general way, but I think we in the scientific world, we need to go a little

further. That seems a little old school at this point. What I have learned and what I continue to say now is that each of these individual bears makes their own individual choices and they're all a recipe of these ingredients of their own experiences to their life. And to generalize them as "all grizzly bears are going to do this because we have data over here that they've done that by GPS locations and lines on a map". I feel like that's just like so shallow when you really dealing with an animal that's making such individual choices for itself.

Sure, there are trends, sure there are habits, that bears may tend to go to one way or the other, but what I'm finding more and more is that the encounter these bears whether they're again in captivity or out in the wild is that there's much more to it to them and they are evolving and trying to adapt constantly to what we are changing in their life and we've really pushed them to their edge of adaptation. Again, in order for us to adapt -- because now it's our turn to allow these animals to coexist with us -- we're going to have to take science deeper. We're going to have to look at who they are.

It's something that I'm going to be working on coming up in the next year is doing some relatedness stuff. Looking at who's related to who as far as bears are, and realizing that even in the Yellowstone ecosystem there's these little different pocket cultures of bears that make food choices completely different than they do on the other side of the ecosystem, that have much more tolerance to people and livestock and each other than other bears might on the other side of the ecosystem. This is something that's not only genetic but something that's taught from mother to cub. It's a complicated social structure, and here's an animal that we never thought was social at all. I think science needs to go a little further than that. We're ready to, we have the ability to. I feel like science is opening up their heart and mind towards that a bit more, so it's time to go there.

GT: Well it also calls for research to return to the field, instead of sitting behind computers or a radio collar work and observe, I mean really see what's going on and really watch these family groups dig yampa or moths, or whatever bears are doing. That calls for different kind of skills, maybe old school skills that are being left behind as people are drawn to more high tech research.

CA: You're right. And I think even taking I often kind of pride myself in that because I was raised with my dad who's a tracker. We would go out into the wild and track and follow things and learn about the ecosystem. And if we were looking for a mountain lion we'd listen to the magpies, and that's how we would find them. We would go to the most primitive, First Nation's kind of tracking style. And what I love now is that I can take that skill set and I can take even some better technology than most scientists have unfortunately, just because the TV guy always gets to get all of the toys and play with them -- it's just the way the world goes -- and I can take that technology and I can take my primitive skills out into the wild, and really kind of get the best of both worlds.

In fact, I had a biologist guy tell me up in Alaska and he's worked with bears for almost 40 years, and I showed him a clip on a carcass one night, where 13 different grizzly bears came to this carcass and there was all this social interaction. And we filmed it from a

blind and I had some camera traps, and he said, “You’ve captured more in one night than I’ve seen in all 40 years as far as social interaction with grizzly bears go”. And it was a really powerful thing for him to say because it just shows that yes, it is time to kind of revisit everything. The world's changed so much. Technology has changed so much. But let's get our boots on the ground, let's get muddy again, let's get out there, let's learn who these animals are. Guess what? In 40 years those bears have changed. It's time to go learn a little bit more the old school way, let's get back out there and see who's out there again.

GT: So along those lines, speaking of television, you are a producer on Expedition Wild and America the Wild for National Geographic. Maybe you can talk about these shows and what your experience with them is like.

CA: Well, fortunately I feel like I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I have a job to go really run around and just tell stories about animals and wildlife and get boots on the ground. And for me as a producer, every time we're planning to go to an area, I think one of the biggest things we want to do is: how can we tell this story differently than it's been told before? We want to make it visually beautiful, but we also want to make sure there's a story that's compelling -- and maybe even more important, a story that's not just preaching to the choir, people who already care about the wild. There's plenty of people who don't care, don't know or are just ignorant to the wild. How can we create something that they're going to stop and watch and learn something, and become immersed in that wild story?

That's really what we're doing when we go out there is just trying to make wild cool. It sounds so simple but it really is the best way I can think to say it. Make the wild cool again. Make it mainstream, make it popular. I always use this, wolverines are cooler than Wolverine in Marvel comics -- and they're real. It's important to be able to go out there and show that there are these wild real super heroes running around everywhere, to the people who don't care will listen.

Of course I would love to make beautiful stuff that grandpa would love to watch too, but I think there's a cocktail there that is important. We're not making TV for ourselves, were making TV to change perceptions of the wild world, at least give an accurate representation of that. I think you have to, because were competing with so many different things now, the apps and video games and million dollar budget movies. It's really difficult to compete with that and that visual space, but we could all just throw our hands up in the air and say let's not try, or we could try and we've chose the latter.

GT: So you've also been on the Oprah Winfrey Show and Conan O'Brien and Good Morning America. I'm just curious; did you find that any of your interviewers there got you to reveal something about yourself that maybe surprised you?

C: They always do. Oprah's one of the greatest interviewers of all time. Again she's got that almost like Brutus's mentality, like body language, doesn't take long being around her where you just want to spill your soul to her, and that's why she's Oprah.

I guess I've got to go back on something that surprised me and sort of surprises people a lot. I was that kid that would take a zero when it came to giving a speech or getting in front of the class, because I was such a shy kid, and I didn't even walk across the stage to graduation because I didn't want to be in front of people. This gift that Brutus gave me, this new look into the wild world, this gift that I feel like I have to tell the world has empowered me to stand, sit next to Oprah and Conan and talk and tell that story. And not be shy and not be afraid and not be that kid anymore. To overcome that and to tell that story. Fortunately I've had the opportunity to be on these big platforms on these tall soapboxes of these shows, and again, every time I go into that, I do always get nervous and I always have to overcome that fear. Cause I know that it's a huge responsibility and I have all of these eyes and all of these ears that I need to tell that story to.

And the greatest interviewers out there like Oprah will allow me to tell that story to dig deeper into the emotions. To allow me to be vulnerable and own being a hypocrite, and realizing that what I learned in the last 20 years is a lot and it's probably only the tip of the iceberg. To keep my mind open and to keep changing. And I might go back on her show again and say something completely different in five more years -- and that's okay. Because I think it's important to stay flexible and open-hearted towards the wild world.

GT: In a TED Talk I watched you give you talked about the possibilities of new discoveries on the inside of nature. Can you explain what you meant there?

CA: Just kind of going back to what we were talking about. These generalizations about animals, white sharks and grizzly bears and when you hear about them, just because they made the headlines and they've done something wrong or Hollywood movies have sensationalized them and turned them into these man-eating beasts. That's kind of like the outside, fake, not real perception of these animals. And as you dig deeper and there's a comparison I like to use, and I hate to anthropomorphize things, because they don't feel the same way as humans do exactly, but I can say grizzly bears have personalities this that and the other, and someone will look me right in the eye and say, "what are you nuts?"

And these are the same people that have dogs at home and they could talk about their dogs that they've had all their life over and over again, and say "Oh yeah, Blackie was a real nice lab that would lay on the couch -- he was lazy and he let the cat jump on him, and then they had Kujo who was a mean pit-bull that was biting the mailman in the butt last week", and they recognize these individual personalities and characteristics in each of their dogs. Now I start calling it canine morphism, which I think I made that word up, but it's a way that people can relate to animals. It's an animal that we can relate to quite well, because we've had them in our families all of our lives. Many of us have.

And dogs they're a lot less intelligent than a bear. In fact I've seen a lot less emotional levels that they can have than a bear, and so I think when you say "hey but bears are like dogs in many ways," people will say "oh, well then if start looking at the landscape. Looking at grizzly bears, you're making decisions about grizzly bears that broad stroke of the brush you realize you're not. Say you're making a decision about dogs. You realize

they're all different and you're going to have to make different decisions about different dogs. And a lot of that is on the inside. The more we open up our minds, I think that we'll see that. The more we are allowed to realize that these animals are complex, we will open our minds and heart to that I think we will see that.

Here are animals that can't really communicate in the way that is simple, but I think that there's way that they can if we would look into it, and try, and it's from the inside, and the more that we dig into the inside of these animals find the depths of who they are, I think that we'll change the way we make our decisions when we are talking about conservation or coexistence and how were going to move forward.

And I really do think it's going to change the way, I do at some level believe that it's the next big revolution. I think that there's going to be a time where we're going to look back on today and we're going to be reading headlines about trophy hunting grizzly bears in Yellowstone and it's going to sound, like: "they did what back then?" It's going to sound so weird. And then I think right now there's enough evidence out there that it is weird. It's time to change. Back to the hypocrisy of me. I am a fifth generation Montanan cattle ranching family. Grew up hunting deer and elk, still love to eat them. Where do you draw the line? I think that trophy hunting, It's -- why? I think a lot of people are really changing their mind about that.

Here I go on a tangent...Let's look at another animal like the bald eagle. On the endangered species list at one point. Massive recovery. Now you see them everywhere, right? And if the headlines right now read "Bald Eagle meat, lean and mean, the new turkey at Thanksgiving!" And guys were going out shooting bald eagles as trophies. I mean talking about an animal that actually is probably borderline overpopulated -- I can't even say that, but they're doing well. And if you said that it's like the symbol of freedom in America, what? The same people who would buy the first grizzly bear tag would say "I would never shoot a bald eagle." That's crazy!

Guess what? It's crazy. It's crazy to shoot a bear. It's crazy to shoot a bald eagle. It is. When you look at a bear, to me it's just like shooting an orca and shooting a mountain gorilla. The same people would never do that. And why, there's some reason why they believe there's more to them, but if they got to know the grizzly bear and realize that there's that exact same thing is going on with these animals, I think that they wouldn't. They wouldn't shoot their dog. They'd freak out about that. And I think they have to change their perception about this animal and it's not an "out there, foo foo, weird, what-is-this-guy-smoking kind of a thing." It's real. It's real science. That's it. And I think that we have to make sure that the world knows that.

GT: So you think that we're going to come to a point, that we're in a period of transition evolving away from any interest in trophy hunting of grizzly bears now.

CA: It used to be cool. It's not cool anymore. Being a big tough ego guy with their bearskin rug on the wall and telling some embellished story is not cool anymore. Being able to go out there and see a bear and understand it and take a picture and turn and walk

away and let that bear share the landscape and live another day, that's cool. We've got to make sure that's cool for everybody. I do believe that that old school mindset is going extinct. And that's okay. I know plenty of hunters, I hunt myself and for different reasons, and I think that things are really changing in that way. I even think that that's changing and that's okay too, and my mind's open and I listen to everybody and I've evolving, and I may be a vegetarian next time I talk to you on the phone. But I think it's okay for this change to happen. You don't have to give up everything, you've just got to open your mind up and listen. Just listen. Because I think that the world is ready for it.

GT: Well thank you Casey. You're listening to The Grizzly Beat and we're talking with naturalist and filmmaker Casey Anderson, and founder of Grizzly Bear Sanctuary: Grizzly Encounter. Thank you very much.