

The Grizzly Beat, Episode 4
Transcript, Tim Bozorth Interview
April 5, 2016

Grizzly Times, Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox and welcome to the Grizzly Beat. Today we have with us Tim Bozorth, who spent his 45-year career before retirement as a federal scientist and land manager -- most recently as field manager for the Bureau of Land Management in Dillon, MT. While in Dillon, Tim served for 10 years as the BLM representative on Yellowstone's Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. Tim also worked for the U.S. Geologic Survey and BLM for 25 years as a hydrologist. Tim has a B.A. in Biology from Berkeley.

Tim, as a land manager you worked on many controversial aspects of grizzly bear recovery in an important part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. What do you think was one of your greatest accomplishments, and what were some of the biggest challenges you left your successors?

Tim Bozorth: Well, I think one of my greatest accomplishments is yet to be fulfilled and that's dealing with the United States USDA Sheep Experiment Station in the Centennial Mountains, and trying to relocate that Experiment Station in another location that is less critical to grizzly bear recovery. A great many NGO's and the Forest Service spent a lot of effort trying to decrease threats to grizzly bears in grazing allotments, in areas occupied by grizzly bears and were very successful in retiring a great many grazing allotments and the USDA Sheep Experiment Station stands out as kind of an anomaly, in that not only do they want to keep grazing sheep in those high mountain pastures that are now occupied by grizzly bears, but in addition, there's been mortalities of grizzly bears on the Sheep Station and that's a direct result of protecting sheep -- sheep herders that were hired by the Sheep Station and it was determined pretty much shot and killed a grizzly bear there.

And there's been a number of other rumors of grizzly bears and other bears demise once they were on the Sheep Station property. So that's been an effort that's been ongoing for a number of years and continues to this day. And hopefully before I'm gone entirely that will be resolved, and that land will be returned to public management, and the grizzly bears will occupy that area as well as other wildlife species, and not domestic sheep.

There's been some other things that I worked on as part of the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee, and one was a constant effort in trying to recover the grizzly bear that goes on today, is trying to decrease threats and one thing we did was we -- BLM in Dillon -- required outfitters to carry bear spray and that went off. A lot of angst by some people, but the outfitters didn't really balk at that and that's been very successful for BLM.

I think that really to try to continue to reduce the threats to grizzly bears I'd like to see hunters carry bear spray in any hunting unit that is occupied by grizzly bears. I don't see

a reason why not to do that. I think that's a pretty low hurdle to get across and I'd like to see the state fish and game agencies in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming implement that.

GT: That makes a lot of sense. Especially since over the last decade data from the federal government shows that conflicts between big game hunters and grizzly bears are now one of the leading causes of grizzly bear mortality. Yet you were the only director of a land managing agency in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to require outfitters to carry bear pepper spray in grizzly bear habitat. Why do you think managers are so reluctant to take that step?

TB: That's a good question, I'm not sure. When I talk to the Forest Service about doing that on the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee they felt that legally their lawyers wouldn't try to support them in doing that. And it was such an obvious way to reduce risk to bears that I just went ahead and did it, and there was never any question or concern about it. It was an easy thing to do. And the outfitters complied, so I really don't know why there's a reluctance. I think there might be some push back from some folks because of the minor costs, but if you look at the price of an elk hunt on an outfitted elk hunt, it's such a minor thing to do. It usually makes a lot of sense to me to do.

GT: And it works.

TB: Yeah, I think bear spray, if we can continue to try to encourage people to use and carry bear spray, and hopefully not have to use it, but if they do it's much better alternative than protecting your elk or getting into a conflict over an elk, or running into a bear during hunting season, to use bear spray instead of a gun and try that reduce the mortality rate. I mean we looked at the possibility of up to 10 percent of the bears in the ecosystem this year being eliminated and that's just not sustainable. And yet we're marching on towards trying to delist the grizzly bear and I think there's just too many risks out there to do that at this time.

GT: I would like to get back to that point about delisting and risk in a moment, but first, you developed a program to reduce human-bear conflicts by loaning out bear-proof coolers and electric fence and outfitter kitchens. How well did that program work and what kind of challenges did you face?

TB: The challenge that we had with BLM was lack of funding. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in its grizzly bear recovery program had funding that they provided to the Forest Service for food storage containers and for various methods of trying to decrease conflicts with grizzly bears. BLM didn't receive any of those kind of funds, and so it was a matter of trying to go out there and put things together by talking to NGOs and requesting funding through the agency to build things like food storage containers. I had an individual in our warehouse construct -- buy the steel and construct the containers and we placed them in some of recreation sites after we tested up in West Yellowstone that Grizzly Bear Recovery Center. And so that's worked out well, so we gave some to the Montana Fish and Game at one of their fishing access sites and we put them at some of our recreation sites on the Madison.

We also got some material to create some place you could hang game by attaching game poles to trees, and using some metal to hold those game poles in place on the trees. We acquired some electric fencing to fence in food acquired a kitchen unit that could be closed down, and bear-proof coolers. Things like that we could loan out to outfitters and hunters to decrease the likelihood that there's going to be a food conflict.

So, some of those things that's just a matter of trying to find the funding, and going out and making sure people knew that those things were available if they wanted to borrow them.

GT: And you have a fair amount of support among people who use them?

TB: We were able to get money a little bit of money through the agency and through some NGOs, we were able to obtain funding so it was a matter of just going out and trying to get the funding as best we could. Now I think you know, those kind of opportunities are decreasing as the agencies' budgets are constrained and as we move closer towards recovery and delisting, I think those opportunities decrease because I think people think there's enough bears out there and some instances, so they are less likely to provide that kind of funding through the government.

GT: So what about funding post-delisting? There is this discussion obviously now about removal of protections for grizzly bears and concerns about whether or not adequate funding will be available. What's your take on the funding issue?

TB: Once the bear's delisted, the money for trying to reduce threats is going to dry out. The agencies just aren't going to obligate the money for a species that's delisted and according to Fish and Wildlife Service is doing okay. So I think it's going to be much harder for the agencies to acquire the funding necessary to reduce threats, and as we know the threats are increasing. The population growth in the Gallatin Valley, in Big Sky, increasing dramatically. It's one of the top growing regions in the country right now, population-wise, percentage, on a percentage basis, it's amazing what's going on here.

And the people are moving here for their access to public lands and they like to hunt and fish and hike and ride bikes, and they're right in the middle of some of the areas that everyone hopes grizzly bears are moving into and expanding and conflicts are going to be there. We're going to see more and more human conflict, human-caused deaths, traffic, and hunting. It's just going to get more and more need for efforts to decrease threats to grizzly bears, and I don't think the money's going to be there.

GT: Right, do you have a sense that the states are going to get equally hit as the federal land management agencies?

TB: Yeah, I think the state's are going to have a harder time spending money on a species that's recovered and there to manage. We're looking at some pretty conservative efforts on reducing budgets and not taking federal money, and I think it's going to be difficult

for the states to put a significant effort out there to a species that's theoretically, according to them, recovered.

GT: Tim, in the years you served on the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Subcommittee, you saw the decline of several key foods for Yellowstone grizzly bears: Yellowstone cutthroat trout, whitebark pine, Yellowstone's northern elk herd. Yet the Fish and Wildlife Service came out with the rule to delist grizzly bears in March saying that bears can compensate with other foods. Can you share your perspective on this?

TB: I think a lot of the grizzly bear population gains in the Yellowstone Ecosystem were made at a time when the northern elk herd was high, when whitebark pine nuts were available and when cutthroat trout were abundant in Yellowstone Lake. And those three things just aren't there anymore. And I think, in my opinion, it seems to me that the core population in the Park and protected areas like the Park, Parks -- Grand Teton and Yellowstone -- those bears have a harder time making a living than they did. And I think the population increase in the core area's declining. And I think those bears are moving out because the high protein food sources, the high fat food sources, aren't there anymore and yes, grizzly bears will adjust and eat other things. They have to now. But I think you're pushing more bears out into areas that are less protected, and there's more threats while we have not enough funding to deal with those threats.

The cutthroat trout population in Yellowstone Lake is never going to be like it was. There's a great effort to reduce the Lake trout population, but it's not going to ever go away and the cutthroat trout food source in Yellowstone Lake is never going to be like it was before. The northern elk herd is down from 19,000 animals in northwestern part of the Park to 4,000 animals. There's almost no hunting being proposed in the northwest part of the ecosystem such as the Gallatin, the Gardiner population is down, those areas. You're seeing a big decrease in elk numbers and the availability of that high protein food source is greatly diminished.

Whitebark pine is essentially gone in much of the ecosystem. The pine nuts were a great source of high fat food in the late summer, early fall for bears to acquire, and now that's gone. So I mean those are three of the dominant food sources for bears were utilizing, and I think we haven't really seen the long-term results of that because of that slow rate which bears reproduce, and we just don't know yet, I don't think, what the real impacts of all of that are.

GT: So yea, the challenge of time. You talked a little bit about grizzly bear mortality earlier, but maybe you can expand on that. So during the last 10 years, we've seen grizzly bear mortalities in the Yellowstone ecosystem increase, while according to federal estimates, the population has remained more or less flat. Last year, 2015, 61 grizzly bears were reported to have died, 55 from human causes, which means that a total of at least 90 bears died when you apply the government estimate of unreported death. So this is about 12 percent of the population dead. Given this kind of mortality, do you think that removing Yellowstone protections is appropriate?

TB: No, I don't think it's appropriate. I think those mortality rates aren't sustainable. The mortality rates have continued to climb since I was involved with the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee in 2002 -- when I first started going to those meetings and was appointed to represent BLM, I've seen mortality rates steadily increase. And I think like I mentioned earlier with the increase in population, the food sources being diminished in the core area in particular, I think the risks are too high to move forward with delisting. I don't think we have, while the population theoretically could be determined to be stable, I think it's actually declining somewhat, especially in the core area and the risks are too great.

GT: Tim, If you were still working and were given the job of grizzly czar, what else would you do related to grizzly bears?

TB: I think there's a number of things you could do to reduce threats to grizzly bears. I think you could require, I think hunters should be required to carry bear spray in hunting units that are occupied by grizzly bears. That's not a big ask. Thousands of people acquire bear spray as they go into the Park, Parks -- both Grand Teton and Yellowstone -- for hiking. You know, I don't think it's a big ask for the Fish and Game agencies in the three states to require hunters to carry bear spray with them when they're hunting. I just don't think that's a big request.

I think there's more efforts in food storage that need to take place, that we need more dispersal of food storage containers throughout the ecosystem.

I think we need to encourage movement of grizzly bears in various areas outside of the Park and try to reconnect with the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. I think until that connection is made, I don't see why we need to rush delisting at this point. I know it is a success story that government wants to hang its hat on, a T and E species, but I think it's too big a risk at this point. I think we're going to be back where we were with a decreased population, and I think we're going to be back where we were if we move ahead with delisting. If the government moves ahead with delisting, I think we're going to be back with a threatened species eventually, in probably 10 years. Because the population will continue to decline because the threats aren't addressed.

GT: Interesting. Tim, would you like to expand on your views of other threats that you see that grizzly bears face?

TB: Yeah, we've got sheep in the Gravelly's, domestic sheep in the Gravelly's, domestic sheep, there's still a push to get the sheep back up in the Centennials again, so those threats aren't going away, and we've lost bears because of that, and we're going to continue to see bear mortality, but the human-caused mortality rate is so high, that I just don't see delisting and then the potential for hunting bears down the road as something that is a prudent thing to do for grizzly bears.

GT: Shifting gears, Tim, I'm interested in your perspective on the month long armed takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon last winter -- and perhaps maybe on a personal note, how did that incident affect you?

TB: Well, I moved up here in the late 70s, largely because of the access to public land. I didn't want to live in a place that I didn't have easy access to the outdoors and public land to camp and hunt and fish on, and I think there's a lot of people that have moved into Montana and Wyoming, Idaho in particular, other states as well in the West -- to a large degree for their access to public land. Certainly it's a big draw to the Bozeman area and others as well.

And to me it was a pretty big insult to have spent my entire -- pretty much adult life working to protect public lands, manage public lands for the benefit of all the people in the United States and elsewhere. But funded by the public nationwide, and to have a small group of radical armed people take over a wildlife refuge and their aim being to turnover the country's public lands to ranchers, loggers and miners who have pretty much dominated the discussion on use of public lands over the decades previous is kind of just insulting to me. The public owns those lands, they're managed for the general public and multiple uses occur on them, huge subsidies in ranching, timber, and mining occur as well as other things, recreation is subsidized as well.

So, the thought of turning those over to ranchers, loggers and miners who have pretty much had a huge say in the management of public lands already just is kind of dumbfounding to me. I would like to see more support out of the general public as far as retaining public lands, but the polls that have been taken, especially in Montana show over 60 percent favor retaining federal ownership of public lands. The state can't manage those lands. The state manages for a profit for the school trust.

And the federal government does not manage for a profit, it subsidizes the livestock industry, the mining industry, the oil and gas industry, and timber sales are done at below costs and grazing is \$1.65 an animal unit month. And on state land it's five times that at least, and private grazing is over 20 to 25 dollars an animal unit month. So, there's a huge grazing subsidy that the individuals who have those federal grazing permits don't want the land because they can graze it for next to nothing. There's no support there. The timber industry doesn't support it because they know the cost of timber goes up when the state puts up a timber sale compared to the BLM or the Forest Service.

GT: Did it surprise you that more people were not rallying behind the cause of public lands at that time?

TB: It did. I thought there would be more of an outcry of support. I know eventually there was more in Oregon. There were individuals, but I think they were afraid. I think there was a fear of those individuals that are pretty radical, armed and I think there's a lot of people out there who quietly support the public lands and federal ownership but just aren't vocal about it. Hopefully they'll vote for their public lands come November.

GT: I hope so. The choice is ours. Thank you so much Tim. This is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Beat, with Tim Bozorth former Director of the Bureau Land Management in Dillon MT, and member of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. Thank you very much.