

A Will to Dominate

Problems and Pathologies of State Wildlife Management

by David Mattson, Ph.D.





The photographs on the cover are illustrative of contradictory narratives about hunting and state wildlife management; on the one hand an ethos and institution bespeaking bigotry, racism, and violence—and on the other, an ethos and institution featuring tradition, family, and skill.

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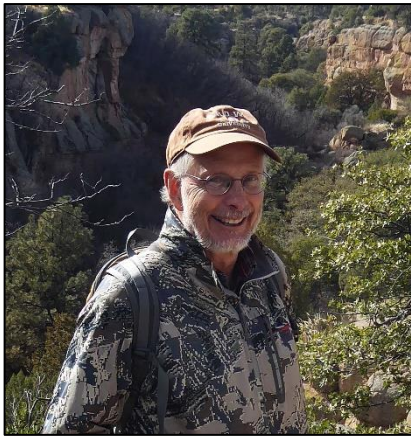
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A Will to Dominate

Problems and Pathologies of State Wildlife Management

Introduction

Some Personal Background



I have been fortunate to spend most of my life out in the wilds among wild animals – and even more fortunate yet to have gotten paid for the privilege. The professional focus of this field work has been large carnivores, notably grizzly bears and mountain lions. One of my great joys has been following these animals around and, not only attempting to fathom the mysteries of how they make a living, but also coming to know them as individuals with their own lives full of joy, trauma, and challenge – the kinds of insights that beloved roadside grizzly bears such as [Jackson Hole's 399](#) now provide multitudes of people.

My studies naturally enough gave rise to a number of scientific publications and reports, some of which were directly relevant to management of grizzly bears and their habitats (you can find more about my research at [AllGrizzly](#)). This intersection with management resulted in a headlong collision with wildlife and wildland managers and what was for me their alien pursuit of power, prerogative, larger budgets, and exploitation of the natural world at the behest of entrenched special interests organized around consumptive uses. The result was not pleasant. However, these experiences inspired me to reconstruct my relatively naïve ideas about peoples' motives and the means by which they individually and collectively make decisions. What followed was a relatively fruitful period of systematic inquiry into the systems we humans have constituted to govern our relations with the natural world (for example, [1-14]).

This fusion of intellectual inquiry with sometimes traumatic lived ordeals, all leavened by early formative experiences, gave rise to a more coherent critique as well as more cogent understanding of why I have been so disturbed for so long by our systems of natural resources management, none more so than our institutionalized management of wild animals in the United States. What had been inchoate distress was transformed into a coherent picture of the whole, in much the same way as a fully realized puzzle emerges from systematically fitting together otherwise chaotic individual puzzle pieces.

I found myself – and continue to find myself – mortally offended, not only by how the institution of wildlife management treats sentient beings that we've relegated to the

category of “animal,” but even more so by the extent to which this institution has subverted the scientific enterprise, and, even more than that, by the despotic and exclusionary nature of authoritative decision-making. Moreover, I found myself – and continue to find myself – dismayed by the apparent limited capacity for self-reflection among many of those who work for and defend this institution or, if not, their apparent unabashed embrace of a system that is typified by deeply institutionalized bias, bigotry, and despotism.

I suppose you could chalk this indignation up to the fact that I was raised in South Dakota as a died-in-the-wool populist infused with a strong Christian ethic, subsequently indoctrinated by a higher education, and influenced by relatives who had an abiding soft spot for the animals they surrounded themselves with on their farms and ranches.

From this one might surmise that I am *not* a bleeding-heart elitist liberal from one of the two coasts – which is the case. I grew up among people who hunted as a cultural motif and without malice or an ideological stake in the practice. My grandparents on both sides settled on ranches in western South Dakota near the turn of the last century – one couple going on to cobble together a large property in Harding County, the other going bust on a poverty ranch near the Badlands, but then setting up shop on a truck farm at the foot of the Black Hills. They were all self-made, as were my parents. They made their living absent any subsidies from the federal government in the form of cut-rate grazing fees on federal lands.



My maternal grandfather and his brother herding horses in Harding County, circa 1909.

In service of full disclosure, my view of hunting, hunters, and wildlife managers has been contaminated by early experiences that left a strong impression. Among these was tracking several wounded deer that had been shot by hunters and then been left to wander off and die; and deer that had likewise been mortally wounded and left by poachers; and a deer that I found and finished off that had been skewered by an archer...and left to endure a slow painful death. All of this was compounded by encounters with drunk hunters driving around with guns hanging out of the back of pick-ups; on several occasions with hunters trespassing on our property, one of whom deliberately shot over my head; and, on one notable occasion, hunters who stopped in the middle of the road on our ranch to start

blazing away down the road in the direction of our house and barn at a buck that careered in front of them.

My own experiences have made clear to me that hunters are a varied lot, as are the wildlife managers who serve them. But very few are icons of virtue in genuine need of meat for the table. By contrast, I would say something close to the opposite of the many predators I have studied. If anything, I have profoundly admired virtually all of the animals that I've followed, virtually all of which killed other animals for food out of genuine need, even allowing for instances of what some might call "surplus killing" – which calls into question the issues of intent, purpose, and configuring socio-psychological dynamics on the part of predators, including human predators.



*Our ranch in
the Black Hills,
circa 2009.*

The Essays

The fruits of this lived experience can be found in the essays of this compilation. They all address a common theme: the pathologies and other problematics of state institutions of wildlife management in the United States. I don't use the word pathology lightly, realizing that this term is necessarily referenced to some notion of health. In this case, I consider health to be manifest in democratic forms of governance that faithfully reflect the full diversity of our identities, interests, and worldviews (for example, [7, 8, 13]). Perhaps more controversially, I also consider health to be manifest in governance that provides for the welfare and well-being of other sentient beings who lack our particular semiotic and textual forms of communication – notably, fellow large-brained mammals such as grizzly bears, wolves, and mountains lions [15].

My Main Thesis

In service of succinctness, and as a preview of my main thesis, I consider wildlife management by state governments to be a throwback to the era when non-Hispanic white men unapologetically dominated our socio-political landscape. In those times, the prevailing ethos was one of domination and use, not only of nature and the wild animals therein, but also women, anyone with more than a hint of melanin in their skin, and people who deviated from arbitrary norms of gender and sexuality. This ethos persists as the justifying principle for those who are privileged by an institution – wildlife management – devoted to the notion that animals exist primarily to be hunted down by mostly non-Hispanic white men, albeit in a regulated way that provides for a sustainable “harvestable surplus.”



To be clear, this ethos derives from one that saw the genocide of native peoples, the disenfranchisement of women and minorities, a civil war over the perpetuation of slavery, the determined persecution of predators, and, earlier on, the related slaughter of virtually any non-domesticated animal that moved. Those who defend our current system of wildlife management would decry any association with this vile legacy. Yet, these same people devotedly defend the idea that animals exist almost exclusively to be “used” (i.e., killed) by humans, with minimal regard for welfare or well-being – not unlike those who made similar defenses of slavery and Jim Crow segregation in reference to non-white people. By and large, these same people also work assiduously to exclude anyone who *doesn't* want to kill wild animals from having a voice in deliberations over how wild animals are “used.”

As egregious, state wildlife management, rather than being an icon of fiduciary public virtue, more closely resembles a business selling public goods (i.e., wildlife) for private profit (i.e., hunting licenses) to a small minority of people from a narrow demographic (e.g.,

non-Hispanic white men) while using public funds to develop marketing campaigns (i.e., messaging) to recruit more customers (i.e., hunters) (for example see [16-23]). Perhaps needless to say, this business model organized around selling publicly-owned assets (i.e., wildlife) to people with a minority interest (i.e., hunters) is the antithesis of an ideal where impartial trust administrators (i.e., wildlife agency governors) faithfully attend to the full diversity of interests and needs manifest by their trustees (i.e., the totality of the American public) [24].

The main claim to progress made by those who vocally defend the institution of wildlife management is that wild animals are no longer indiscriminately slaughtered for commercial purposes – with the explicit exception of coyotes, bobcats, foxes, prairie dogs, wolves, pocket gophers...and more – and that any person who wants to kill a wild animal is required to buy a license before doing so without, parenthetically, needing to display competence with their chosen weapon or trap (for example [25, 26]).



The essays in this collection provide substantiation for this portrait.

An Important Proviso

These essays focus on cultures and systems of governance, specifically the modalities and dominant themes that configure management of wildlife in the United States. Much of this dynamic organizes around the ethos of hunting and the influence of hunters operating under the justifying banner of what has come to be called The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation [18, 25, 26]. Hunters and those who operate at their behest are thus strongly implicated in everything that follows.

Even so, I do not purport to ascribe the emphasized themes and modalities in these essays to all of those who have hunted, identify as hunters, or operate as their functionaries in wildlife management agencies. It is not only easy to conflate the necessarily wide range of

variation in worldviews, personalities, and behaviors of those who hunt with modalities typifying central tendencies, but also for those who may feel offended or defensive to conflate my critique of culture and governance with a critique of all who hunt. It is not. My lived experience and the relevant research make clear that self-identified hunters are a diverse lot, not only in how they orient to wild animals, but also in how they orient to people.

Even so, culture and institutions are created by people and thus ineluctably reflect the worldviews, perspectives, and behaviors of those who constituted them. The connection is inescapable. At the same time that the generalities expressed in these essays do not fully describe all who identify with state wildlife management, they also capture much that is shared and essentialized. Narratives and cultures shape as well as mirror communities of people who strongly identify with something as potent as hunting and killing wild animals.

Reading the Essays

These four essays are ideally read in sequence given the extent to which each one builds on the ones before. However, there is also enough redundancy to allow for the essays to be read as stand-alone pieces. The first essay addresses governance and representation issues; the second, the ethos and iconography of wildlife management and hunting; the third, trends in hunter numbers and hunting ideology that aggravate intrinsic structural issues; and, the fourth, the social, political, ideological and biogeographic entanglements of wildlife management.

Each essay contains supporting references that are listed at the end and sequentially numbered as they appear in the text. These references serve as guide to additional readings for those who might be interested in finding more detail about the each addressed issue.

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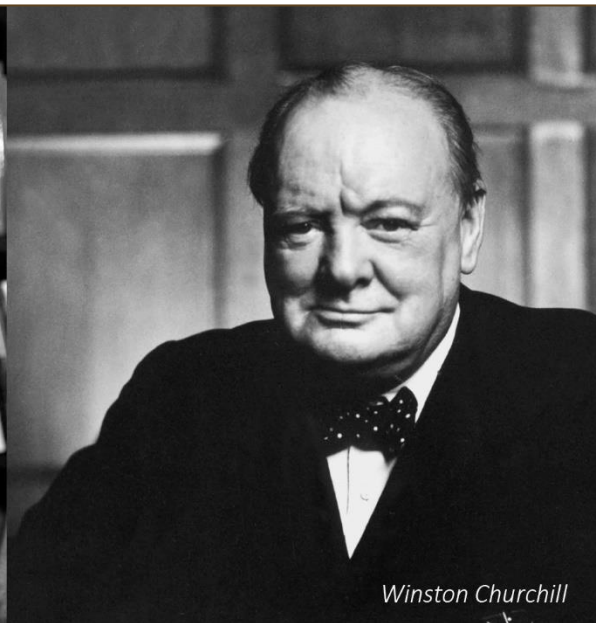
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The Despotic Nature of State Wildlife Management



Francis Fukuyama



Winston Churchill

by David Mattson
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An Introductory Aside on Democracy

Francis Fukuyama of Harvard University recently completed a magisterial two-volume review of the emergence and evolution of human systems of governance. The volumes are somewhat immodestly entitled “The Origins of Political Order” [1] and “Political Order and Political Decay” [2]. Despite obligatory sniping by other political scientists, Fukuyama’s basic thesis is compelling. Human governance has evolved from the egalitarian and Big Man forms typical of small collectives and tribes; to oligarchies, monarchies, and autocracies; to democracy—the culminating manifestation of our modern aspiration for a life of dignity [3]. Winston Churchill probably best captured the flawed but virtuous nature of democracy with his quip: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time.” That having been said, I consider democracy to be one of humankind’s greatest inventions.

Why? Quite simply because, in theory, every citizen is afforded authoritative standing in the political process, even if it amounts to no more than an allotted vote for a representative. As important, we all (again, in theory) can publicly voice our perspectives and preferences

regarding the outcomes of the political process. Yes, democracy in application is messy and sometimes corrupt. But perhaps the essential feature is a shared narrative that can be invoked to justify demands for the equitable empowerment of all citizens.

Parenthetically, one important dimension of democracy is the scale at which we invest citizens with voice and standing, usually with reference to specific public issues. Municipal? County? State? National? Some issues entail consequences of such magnitude for so many people that decision-making necessarily occurs at a national scale. National defense is a classic example. Regardless of the scale, some issues and outcomes are of such importance collectively that they trump the localized special interests of the few [1]—for example the well-established notion of eminent domain [4]. At some point, enough people have a sufficient stake over a wide enough geographic extent to legitimize the elevation of political deliberations from the municipal to the county, the county to the state, or the state to the national. Those whose local interests are swamped by such an up-scaling may cry “foul,” but at some point the aggregate interests of the many outweigh the localized interests of the few.

Rounding out this brief primer, it is also worth naming the most enduring threats to democracy: corruption and despotism. Put simply, despotism occurs when the political process concentrates ever more power, wealth, and other values in the hands of the few at the expense of the many, typically through the overt or sometimes veiled disenfranchisement of most people [3]. Corruption is the betrayal of the public trust by public officials, usually in the form of preferential service based on kinship, financial dependencies, or ideological affinities [5]. Yes, despotism and corruption can be pervasive under the covering rhetoric of “democracy.” But this unpleasant fact does not justify any tolerance for these profoundly toxic phenomena—at least for those who care about the health of our democratic society.

And Now for Grizzly Bears

What does all of this have to do with grizzly bear management? More specifically, what does this have to do with the kind of management we can look forward to if we remove Endangered Species Act protections for grizzly bears in the contiguous United States and turn them over to the tender mercies of state wildlife management?

Here and in my three following essays [6, 7, 8] I attempt to answer this question.

In brief, wildlife management by the states of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana is a corrupt and despotic system enslaved through culture and financial dependencies to serving the interests of those who have a worldview that features violence, iconizes weapons, makes fetishes of sexual organs, and instrumentalizes animals [6]. Moreover, state wildlife managers have a history of demonizing carnivores in defiance of the best available science as part of a narrative that features killing predators to purportedly boost sport-hunting opportunities for “customers” [8]. And, interestingly enough, all of this is realized through the services of people who are, by and large, well-intentioned and nice...men. This leads to what I call the “nice guy fallacy,” which is the chronic tendency of apologists for state wildlife management to conflate personality with institutions and culture.

In what follows, I elaborate on the despotic and corrupt nature of regional state wildlife management. In the next essay of this series [6], I explore the culture of this institution. And,

finally, in my last essay [8], I describe in more detail the insidious connections among culture, politics, and wildlife management in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana.

Enfranchisement of the American Public

Grizzly bears in the contiguous United States have been managed since 1975 under authority of the US Endangered Species Act (ESA). Yellowstone grizzlies—along with conspecifics elsewhere in the contiguous US—were afforded ESA protections because they were threatened by humans who killed them, aided and abetted by existing state and federal regulations. In fact, wildlife managers in Wyoming and Montana sponsored trophy hunting of grizzlies despite the fact that the Yellowstone population was severely diminished and potentially even heading towards extirpation in areas outside of National Parks [9]. Listing of grizzly bears under the ESA is testimony to the fact that the national public have a compelling stake in management of our iconic regional populations, and that management under state auspices was failing [9].

Perhaps the most important effect of the ESA—a federal law—was the enfranchisement of the entire citizenry of the United States (currently 240 or so million adults) when it came to managing grizzly bear populations in the contiguous U.S. From 1975 on, every American citizen had authoritative standing in grizzly bear management, including the opportunity to provide input regarding weighty decisions. Anyone who could establish standing sufficient to pursue litigation could do so with the intent of ensuring that federal managers followed the law. In fact, the repeated success of litigants in court demonstrated that agency managers, left to their own devices, were almost invariably drifting towards serving the status quo interests of the Lords of Yesteryear: The Czars of logging, mining, agriculture, and recreation. But for litigation, we would not have habitat-based recovery criteria for grizzly bears in the contiguous-U.S., standards for managing roads and habitat security, or any meaningful monitoring of bear foods.

Of relevance to all this, we Americans are increasingly a diverse lot, including nearly 40% who are of Hispanic, African-American, Asian, or Native decent, and roughly 51% who are female. Of these multitudes, only around 4% hunt [10]. By contrast, 6-9 times as US adults primarily enjoy wild animals by viewing them—alive [10]. Certainly, the main reason why 3-4 million people visit the Yellowstone ecosystem each year is to see wildlife, including charismatic animals such as grizzlies, not to put a bullet in them and cart a head back home [11]. The point here is that our national-level interests in animals such as Yellowstone's grizzly bears primarily organize around appreciating them for intrinsic and aesthetic reasons, as well as for the derivative economic benefits of non-consumptive tourism—not for the intrinsically limited opportunities to use bears by allowing a very few to kill them in service of a need to enhance a sense of self-potency (more on this in [6]). It's not surprising that of the people queried in a 2016 national poll, nearly 70% opposed and only 20% supported hunting grizzlies for trophies [12], similar to the 71% queried in a 2018 poll who considered hunting animals for sport to be “morally wrong” [13]¹.

¹ These figures are in contrast to the 49% of Montana residents queried during a 2020 survey by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks who supported hunting grizzly bears “enough to manage their population size” [14]. These

The Disenfranchisement of the American Public

Interestingly enough, the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), which holds primary authority for managing grizzly bears under the ESA, has been trying since 1992 to remove ESA protections for the population of bears living in the Yellowstone ecosystem. The FWS was turned back on its first attempt because a judge concurred with litigants that the FWS's Recovery Plan was fatally flawed; on its second attempt by multiple judges who determined that the FWS had grievously neglected relevant science; and on its most recent attempt during 2016-2018 when, again, multiple judges concurred on the agency's faulty treatment of science and faulty provisions for managing grizzlies once they were turned over to state management.

This begs the question of what awaits grizzly bears in the contiguous United States if the FWS is successful in its relentless efforts to remove ESA protections. The answer is: Nothing good, either for the bears themselves, for the national constituency that cares about these animals, or for the health of our democracy.

Why? Because the bears will be turned over to wildlife managers in the states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho—who are not only the antithesis of diverse, but also slaved to the narrow special interests of hunters and fishers within the confines of their respective states, all under the presumed legitimizing rhetoric of the North American Model of Wildlife Management (hereafter the Model [15]). According to proponents of the Model such as Valerius Geist [16], local sportsmen (i.e., hunters and fishers) are the only people who have the best interests of wildlife at heart; are the sole genesis of past wildlife conservation successes; and are the financial backbone of wildlife management.

Hunters and fishers are, in fact, the primary constituency or “customers” of state wildlife managers. Going further, the Model avers they should be the primary constituency and that all others should play second fiddle...at best (again, see [15, 16, 17]). The Model's version of democracy is little more than there will be “hunting opportunity for all” and that there shall be no “prohibitions on...use of wildlife.” One of the biggest perceived threats? “...A value system oriented towards animal rights” [15], which is, in fact, not only a valid and appropriate interest, but also one held by increasing numbers of American citizens [18].

A Last Bastion of White Male Gun Owners

At this point it is worth asking who are these hunters and those who operate at their behest? In the three-state region containing Yellowstone's grizzlies, hunters comprise a mere 13% or so of all adults [10]. They are, moreover, overwhelming male (90%) and non-Hispanic whites (98%) [10]. The employees of the wildlife management agencies who answer to them are likewise more than 95% white and 70-80% male—and almost all are self-styled hunters

contrasting figures highlight three critical points: first, the discrepancy in attitudes and preferences between the national public and residents of the northern Rockies states where most of our grizzlies live (see also [8]); second, the fact that the 49% of people who professed to have voted for Trump in 2016 and, in the YouGov poll, found sport hunting to be morally acceptable in the YouGov poll, is almost identical to the level of support for judicious hunting in Montana—a state that voted heavily for Trump (see [8]); and, third, the extent to which the phrasing of survey questions can preconfigure peoples' responses.

[19]. Even more extreme, as of 2020, the 21 Commissioners appointed by Governors in the three-state region to have ultimate authority over wildlife management were 100% non-Hispanic whites, 81% male, and all self-described hunters—most, avidly so².

Of equal import to rote demographics, state wildlife management agencies are almost entirely dependent on hunters, fishers, and gun owners for revenue. Aggregated over all three states, 30% of funding comes from federal taxes generated primarily by national sales of arms, ammunition, and harvest-related activities—channeled through the FWS; 67% comes primarily from the sale of products to hunters and fishers, principally hunting and fishing licenses; and only 2% comes from general funds appropriated directly or indirectly by state legislators³. In other words, wildlife managers are almost entirely beholden to sportsmen and owners of firearms for their direct revenues.

Despotism

Not surprisingly, the upshot of all this is what some call an iron triangle—others, even, a diamond triangle [20]—characterized by institutionalized corruptive relations among regulators (i.e., Commissioners), the regulated (i.e., hunters and fishers), and functionaries of the regulators (i.e., employees of state wildlife management agencies). State wildlife managers, charged with serving the public interest, are instead coopted by those they presumably regulate and, moreover, focused on serving narrow special interests and corrupted by ideology and financial dependencies [for an example of this critique, see [21]-[25]]. As a result, the large majority of state residents who have an interest in wildlife that doesn't include consumptive use are disenfranchised, disregarded, and ignored. This matters because 38% of all adults in the Northern Rockies states identify themselves as wildlife watchers, of whom 52% are female [10]. In other words, there are more than 2.5-times as many self-identified wildlife watchers as there are hunters, and proportionately five-times as many who are female.

Even so, this entails looking only within the confines of states in the northern Rocky Mountains. Of even greater consequence, removing ESA protections would bring about the explicit disenfranchisement of 99% of the national public that is currently enfranchised by the ESA (this based on the 2010 US Census). And, when accounting for the fact that only 14% of the within-state populations of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho will have a meaningful say in what happens to grizzly bears (i.e., hunters; [10]), the disenfranchisement is an even more staggering 99.9%. Moreover, the representation of non-Hispanic white males will increase from approximately 22% nationally to roughly 90% under auspices of

² For biographies of Commissioners in each state see web pages maintained by the various state Commissions:

<https://idfg.idaho.gov/about/commission/members>

<https://fwf.mt.gov/aboutfwf/commission>

<https://wgfd.wyo.gov/About-Us/Game-and-Fish-Commission/Meet-the-Commissioners>

³ The following links provide overviews of budgets and revenues for each of the state agencies:

<https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/budget/committee/jfac/2021/F1.Monday,%20February%2015/02.Department%20of%20Fish%20and%20Game.pdf>

https://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/fiscal/Session-2021/SubCom-C/FWP_summary.pdf

https://wgfd.wyo.gov/WGFD/media/content/PDF/About%20Us/Commission/WGFD-Revenue-Fact-Sheet_FINAL.pdf

state management of grizzly bears—or even 95% if you allow for the fact Commissioners hold ultimate authority. In other words, over 204 million US adults will be left out in the cold, including a hugely disproportionate number of women, non-hunters, and people of color—including nearly all who value animals such as grizzly bears simply because they exist.

In a word, the unambiguous consequence will be despotism.

The Public Trust and Rhetoric from Nice Guys

It's worth noting at this juncture that state wildlife managers have increasingly mobilized rhetoric invoking the Public Trust Doctrine (or PTD) to defend the self-evidently despotic status quo (again, see [15, 16, 17]). This rhetoric entails various claims by those defending the status quo that wildlife managers are attending to diverse public interests through their wise deployment of science (for example, [26]). The argument is basically a technocratic one in which managers are gifted with privileged insights regarding all sorts of things, including who matters, what they want, and what they will tolerate (e.g., “social carrying capacity capacity”).

Even at face value, these claims to authority on human-related matters are peculiar given that 99% of state wildlife managers are trained as biologists, not sociologists [23]. Moreover, it is unclear how wildlife managers are gifted with insight into peoples' aggregate preferences and perspectives—especially when those who value wildlife for “non-consumptive uses” are disregarded, even disrespected, any time they comment on management plans or testify at wildlife Commission meetings. And, when you closely scrutinize what wildlife managers say and write, you will find beneath the prefatory gloss, at the level of clearly stated objectives, an enduring core commitment to providing a “quality hunt” and harvestable surpluses of game animals (for example, [27]).

The deployment of PTD- and Model-laden rhetoric by wildlife managers has largely been in response to a crisis of legitimacy and finances that emerged in the 1990s—a crisis that exists for good reasons. Numbers of hunters have dropped or, at best, remained more-or-less static, with revenues from hunting license sales lagging behind the mounting costs of operations [10]. Some of the deficit was remedied during 2008-2016 by what I heard some state wildlife managers cynically call “the Obama boost,” which amounted to an increase in tax-based federal grants fueled by a dramatic surge in sales of arms and ammunition, largely to non-Hispanic white men who imagined a sinister federal conspiracy to take their guns away, presumably followed shortly after by marauding hordes of young Hispanic and African-American males. And, perhaps needless to say, criticisms of state wildlife managers have mounted as the perspectives and preferences of increasingly educated urban-dwelling Americans have diverged from the hunting ethos central to state management [19].

Of course—and perhaps paradoxically—most of the people defending the status quo in state wildlife management are sincere and even well-intentioned—usually nice guys who are not very self-reflective or well-informed when it comes to the basics of governance or democracy. This juxtapose of nice guys with palliatives and platitudes can be quite seductive for those who listen with an uncritical and equally uninformed ear, but, in the end, does not negate

the fact that the nice guys who work as state wildlife managers are complicit in a fundamentally corrupt and despotic system.

Houston, We Have a Problem

If you don't think this is a problem, then I would invite you to closely examine life in China, Russia, or Zimbabwe...or any number of other countries that have born the toxic fruits of despotism and corruption. There is no rhetoric, not the vaunted North American Model of Wildlife Management, that can justify how we currently manage wildlife in most states—and most notoriously so in the states of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, the cradle that will rock grizzly bears once ESA protections are removed.

Moreover, if you live anywhere other than in this three-state region, or are a person who advocates some purpose other than hunting grizzly bears, or are someone, say a Native American, who prioritizes spiritual connections with the Great Bear, then think again if you imagine you will have a say in management of a grizzly bear population under the authority of state managers. You will not.

This begs the question of where to from here? In my essay entitled “Worldviews and the Ethos of State Wildlife Management” I explore the problematic ethos embodied in the despotic regime that awaits grizzly bears [6]—more specifically, an ethos organized around violence, death, weapons, racism, sexism, insecurities about potency, and an instrumentalizing impulse. And, again, all of this is brought to you by people who are (for the most part) nice guys.

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Worldviews and the Ethos of State Wildlife Management

by David Mattson
January 2022



Most people are probably familiar with the term ‘worldview,’ but perhaps without a precise understanding of what it might mean. Yet I would argue that worldviews are central to explaining otherwise inexplicable human behaviors—including most of the verbiage by which people express themselves. For those of us who do invoke ‘worldview’ virtually every day, scholars such as David Naugle [1], Jim Sire [2], and Mark Koltko-Rivera [3] have provided a vital service, not only by clarifying this pedigreed concept, but also by offering expositions on its relevance to the human condition along with helpful histories of how and why this concept matured to take its current form.

What is a worldview? Intuitively, one could simply understand it as a “view of the world” that people carry around in their heads. But what does that mean? By all indications, worldview is the portal through which we make meaning of the overwhelming input of sensory experience, which then dictates how we each orient to the world. Worldview is fundamentally semantical and semiotic in nature—configured and represented through internalized stories that we tell about the world and ourselves in it, saturated with emotion-laden icons and symbols. Worldview distills and integrates values, impulses, attractions, fears, and even terrors [4]. Worldviews are typically illogical, incoherent, and resistant to change, largely because they are so intertwined with our identities and social networks [3]. Worldviews are powerful stuff.

Worldviews are not amenable to unambiguous measures similar to those we make in the physical world. Nonetheless, because worldviews so powerfully configure what we say and do, it is relatively easy to use any number of indices to build a reliable picture of this phenomenon for individuals and communities. Analysis of written texts is one approach. Analysis of repeatedly deployed symbols and images is another. And surveys that elicit

peoples' responses to carefully crafted questions are another yet. It turns out that social science provides a box of tools that allows us to usefully describe worldviews.

Nature-views

Various scholars have gone even further to describe typologies by which we can categorize how people view the natural world and themselves in it—what I call “nature-views.” Academics such as Mike Manfredo and Tara Teel at Colorado State University came up with a relatively straight-forward system comprised of four categories or bins [5]. Steve Kellert of Yale University came up with a more nuanced schematic comprised of between eight and nine categories (see his *Value of Life* [6]). Whatever the typology, a major dimension consistently emerges along which most peoples' nature-views can be arrayed. At one extreme is a view that nature—and animals therein—is/are to be dominated and used. At the other extreme is a view that emphasizes intimate, aesthetic, even anthropomorphic connections.

Grizzly Bears?

All of this is relevant to understanding what goes on with state-level management of our wildlife and, in turn, anticipating what will happen to grizzly bears in the contiguous U.S. if Endangered Species Act protections are removed and the bears turned over to the tender mercies of state wildlife managers—and, likewise, relevant to understanding why these managers and the Commissioners who oversee them are seemingly obsessed with initiating a trophy hunt on grizzlies once authority is surrendered to the states by the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

In my previous essay of this three-part series [7], I emphasized governance problems in our current management of wildlife by the states, along with the extent to which this management is enslaved to a very narrow demographic (i.e., non-Hispanic white men) and an equally narrow set of special interests organized around hunting—which is to say, killing wild animals. But here I emphasize the worldviews that inform the despotic and corrupt system I described in my earlier essay.

Just to be clear, none of what I say should be construed as an interest in doing away with hunting. That is not my intent or motivation. In fact, I've spent most of my professional career studying—and admiring—animals that kill other animals. But at the same time, I strongly believe that not all worldviews are equal; nor are the moral and ethical systems embedded in these worldviews equal. Some worldviews and the nature-views therein yield toxic results. Others do not. To believe otherwise is to descend into a quagmire of relativism that is guaranteed to yield nasty outcomes for humanity and the world we occupy.

Nature-views, Hunting, and Carnivores

What are the worldviews that motivate the dominant paradigm of wildlife management? A full description of these views would be overwhelming—and diverse they are—so instead I focus here on modalities or dominant themes. Those who are invested in and benefiting from

status quo wildlife management clearly adhere in varying degrees to a number of nature-views. But this does not negate the fact that some views are dominant, especially when it comes to driving how state wildlife agencies manage large carnivores including, potentially, grizzly bears in the contiguous United States.

A useful point of entry into this topic is through the results of one particularly interesting research project that I supervised, undertaken by Liz Ruther as part of her Master's degree [8]. We were interested in elucidating peoples' attitudes towards mountain lions as well as their related behaviors. The project entailed asking a random sample of adults whether they would support various measures to protect or conserve mountain lions, including whether they would support a ban on killing juvenile lions, limit the killing of females, or support measures to conserve important lion habitat. On the behavior front, we asked whether they hunted, had killed a lion, or carried a firearm in the woods for protection—versus nothing at all or a non-lethal deterrent such as pepper spray. Of particular relevance here, we also asked people a number of questions designed to help us explain the elucidated attitudes and behaviors. Their answers provided us the basis for scoring how strongly they adhered to a particular nature-view—including a belief in the virtue of dominating and using nature.

The results were striking. Figure 1 at the bottom of this page shows the main relationships. The degree to which our respondents adhered to a belief that nature and animals were to be used and dominated explained most patterns. People who adhered more strongly to this ethos were far more likely to carry firearms, hunt, and have killed a mountain lion. They likewise were far more likely to oppose (or not support) any measure that would limit the killing of lions. And, most noteworthy, they did not favor measures to protect habitat for the benefit of lion conservation.

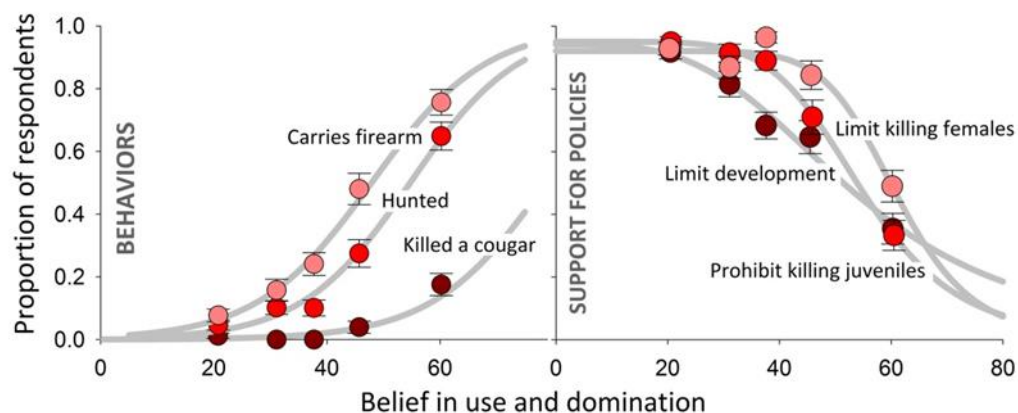


Figure 1. *These x-y graphs show some key results from a study of peoples' perspectives on mountain lions, based on a random survey of adults [8]. The extent to which respondents believed in domination and use of nature was strongly related to the likelihood that they would exhibit lethal behaviors and oppose policies that conserved mountain lions.*

These policy-related results warrant comment because they run counter to the myth that intertwines with the North American Model of Wildlife Management (i.e., the Model). The Model claims that hunters (as per our results, those adhering to the ethos of domination and use) universally support measures that conserve wildlife—all wildlife [9, 10, 11]. Yet here we found that those most closely identified with hunting and status quo wildlife management

were hostile to essentially any measure that would conserve or otherwise curb the killing of a large carnivore—in this case, mountain lions.

As it turns out, our results were consistent with a wealth of other information showing that many big-game hunters see predators, not as anything intrinsically worth conserving, but rather as competitors for opportunities to kill large herbivores such as elk, deer, moose, and bighorn sheep (for example, see [12]-[18]). Invoking the language of Freud, this exhibited perspective was clearly *not* informed by the superego, but rather by the ego—the drive for self-gratification. This pattern is not surprising given the extent to which the rhetoric used to promote the Model unabashedly invokes selfishness as a major motivation for those being served by it (for examples of this rhetoric, again see [9]-[11]).

The Iconography of Hunting

Another of my recent projects was equally enlightening. I had gotten interested in the iconography of hunting, more specifically, the seminal icons being promoted by hunting-related magazines. Casting this in more abstract terms, what identities and identifications were being broadcast by literature that served the hunting community? A casual glance through several magazines was enough to clarify candidate icons, including images of non-Hispanic white people (versus people of color), men (versus women), arms and ammunition (versus pages without), dead (versus live) animals, and the percentage of these animals that were males with prominent sex-linked organs (e.g., horns and antlers). I tallied all of the relevant images from a relatively broad spectrum of magazines that I picked up at the local book store, ranging from fringe publications such as *Predator Xtreme* to more stolid products such as *Field and Stream*. As a point of contrast, I also included magazines with a non-hunting outdoor focus, including *Outside* and *Trail Runner*.

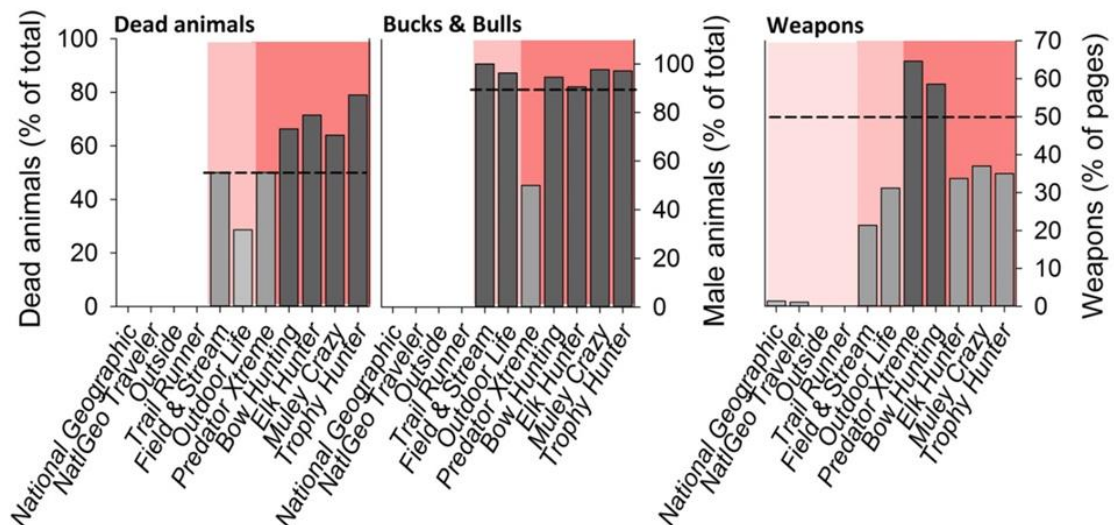


Figure 2. These bar graphs show the results of a survey of images in hunting and non-hunting outdoor oriented magazines, with each bar specific to each magazine. The heights of the bars denote, left, the proportion of all animals shown that were dead (killed by a hunter), middle, the proportion of all animals that were males (almost invariably bucks or bulls), and, right, the proportion of pages that showed a weapon or ammunition.

Again, the results were not subtle. The bar charts in figure 2 show what I found, with each bar a result for the corresponding magazine labeled along the horizontal (or x-) axis. In virtually all of the hunting magazines dead animals accounted for the majority of animal pictures, in *Trophy Hunter* reaching a staggering 80%. Even more dramatically, bucks and bulls (i.e., animals with exaggerated sex-linked organs) accounted for 80-90% of all animal images in all of the hunting magazines but one—*Predator Xtreme*—which focused primarily on showing dead carnivores irrespective of sex. Not coincidentally, weapons or ammunition showed up on between 20 and 65% of all pages, most prominently in *Predator Xtreme* and *Bow Hunting*.



And what about the faces looking back from the pages of these magazines? The results are in figure 3. Of the hunting/fishing magazines, between 85 and 95% were men and only 3 were of people evidencing any ethnicity other than non-Hispanic Caucasian...less than 1% of the total. Interestingly, two of these were of President Obama as part of diatribes against some of his favored policies. The third was of a black man portrayed...as a zombie.



I later tested these results against what I found in a magazine that I picked up in a doctor's office, *Bugle*, the official magazine of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. There was little or no difference. Of the pictured people, 99% were non-Hispanic white and 93% were male. Of the animals, 93% had horns or antlers, although a more modest 30% were dead. Arms and ammunition showed up on 39% of all the pages.

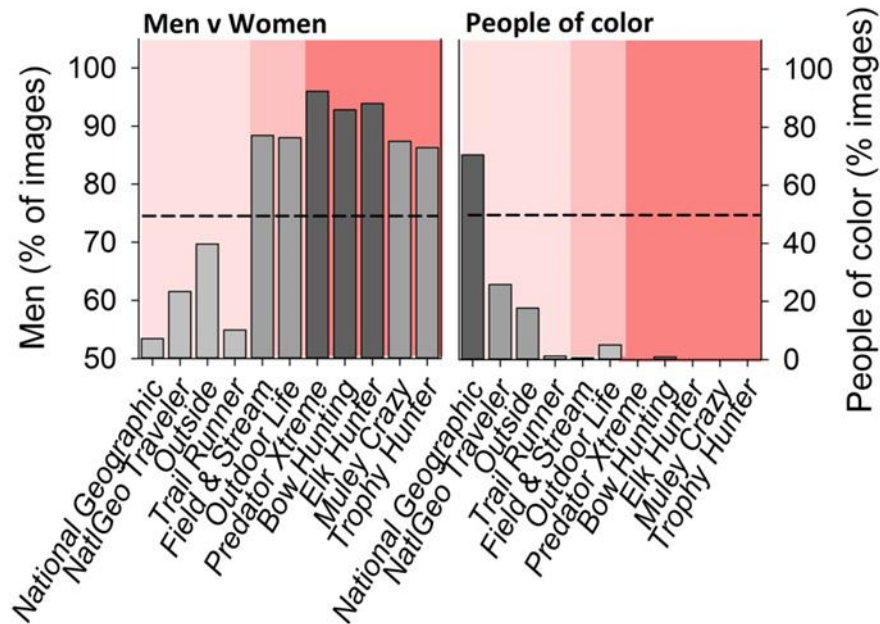


Figure 3. These bar charts show additional results of the survey of images in hunting and non-hunting outdoor oriented magazines, with each bar specific to each magazine. The heights of the bars denote, left, the proportion of all people shown who were male and, right, the proportion who were of any evident color, including Hispanic—i.e., not overtly Caucasian. Note that the scale for men versus women starts at 50%.

What can be concluded from this? I suppose you could argue that definitive conclusions need to await a more definitive study. However, I am willing to wager a substantial amount of money that the extreme results I found would only be confirmed. In short, the iconography of magazines explicitly serving the hunting community disproportionately features death, iconizes weapons, makes fetishes of sexualized organs, and instrumentalizes sentient non-human animals, all of which is consistent with the ethos of domination and use. And, not surprisingly, the faces looking out of these magazines are a mirror of the narrow demographic that hunts—mostly non-Hispanic white males (see [7]).

Parenthetically, I did not find any hunter-oriented magazines entitled something like *Compassionate Sportsman* or *Benevolent Bowhunter*, or even one approximately named *Meat Hunter*, featuring photos of prime backstrap and flank steak (although there is a website named *Meateater*, but featuring the usual assortment of trophy shoots and sexualized animals). More to the point, despite the fact that many hunters might claim they hunt for meat or hold a benevolent view of wildlife, these kinds of orientations are notably absent from the iconography of materials produced for public consumption.

Embrangled Sexism

Before I come to my concluding points, there is one more embranglement that needs to be mentioned—with sex and sexism. This thread is suggested by the few photos of women that I found in hunting magazines. Some images did present empowered self-confident camo-clad

females competently brandishing guns. But there were also a disturbing number of photos featuring scantily-clad nymphs brandishing guns in a way that reeked of sexual innuendo. And, in fact, several academics, most notably rooted in the field of women's studies (e.g., Linda Kalof in [19], [20], and [21]), have presented compelling evidence that masculine sexual pursuits blur with sport hunting, in one extreme case, manifest as men literally hunting fleeing naked women in a video game marketed primarily to hunters. All of this is consistent with a memorable experience of mine dropping in on a social event hosted by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, greeted by a throng of white men immersed in throbbing background music watching films of muscular bull elk wrestling prior to then mounting closely-herded pliant cows.



I have, moreover, personally witnessed the extent to which sexism contaminates debates over management of large carnivores such as grizzly bears. As it turns out, advocates for the welfare, rights, and conservation of large carnivores are disproportionately female and urban-dwelling and, moreover, better educated than those advocating hunting (and opposing protections) on the other side of the issue. This disparity in identities readily translates into a heightening of disparagements and vitriol that invoke gender, perhaps not surprisingly, primarily on the side of the mostly male rural-dwelling hunters (for example, see this paper by Rachel Einwohner [22]). That having been said, the women I've interacted with can have strong views and feelings, but they seem to also preserve a greater generosity of spirit—which is basically what you might expect.

Not All Worldviews are Equal

So, what can be made of all this? I find the core ethos of especially trophy hunting to be highly problematic. The actualization of this ethos by state wildlife managers and Commissioners is, in fact, the genesis of bad outcomes for both people and animals—

especially large carnivores such as wolves and bears. My first essay [7] elaborated on some of the bad outcomes for people.

Hopefully I don't sound too uncharitable when I note that the dominant worldview of trophy hunters, manifest in most hunting organizations and hunter-focused literature, features the meting out of death to male ungulates sporting massive horns or antlers—followed by the perennial glory shot. It is not too much of a stretch to make a connection between this fact and an impulse to enhance self-perceived potency by killing something that is so graphically virile. Likewise, researchers such as Chris Darimont [24, 25], Beattie Geoffrey [26], and Paul Johnson [27] have shown a similar dynamic organized around the killing of large “fierce” predators. No doubt this is an ancient impulse for men [26], but such a pedigree doesn't make it anymore laudable, virtuous, or appealing. Manage animals such as grizzly bears so that men can go out and kill them to bring home as a symbol of their potency and power? The impulse is understandable, but not a basis for public policy or the management of a public trust such as wildlife.

This brings me back to a point I started with. Not all worldviews or associated ethical systems are equal. In fact, there are many that I would personally like to see fade away because they are the product of ancestral lifeways that yielded intolerance, parochial perspectives, a small moral universe, and violence. Scholars as diverse as Stephen Pinker [28], Peter Singer [29], Shalom Schwartz [30], and Myres McDougal [31] have observed an encouraging decline in human-on-human violence along with a correlated increase in the extent of our moral sphere, entailing an ever-broadening ascription of full rights and standing to ever-dissimilar people—including of different races, ethnicities, sex, ages, and, now, sexual orientation and identifications. This has been an important and encouraging trend. And some, including Pinker and Singer, have observed that the current frontier is our view of animals and their prospective rights. Current debates over how we treat (i.e., “manage”) animals are as much a reflection of the journey we Europeans have been on with ourselves as it is about the animals themselves.

I have no doubt that the dominant ethos of hunting and state wildlife management is not only a cultural throwback, but also a regressive if not destructive influence in our society—especially the worldview that spawns trophy hunting. My perhaps unwanted advice to trophy hunters is to get over it, or if you need to kill animals as a virility-enhancing act, don't impose that need as a defining construct on an institution that should instead be serving as public trustee [32].

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The Cult of Hunting

And its Timely Demise

by David Mattson
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On August 7th, 1874, George Armstrong Custer shot a grizzly bear. At the time, he was trespassing in the Black Hills of the Great Sioux Nation along with more than 1000 heavily-armed soldiers and sundry civilians. To be accurate, he shot the bear as part of a fusillade delivered by two other soldiers and an Arikara scout. According to published accounts, the bear was innocently browsing on berries in a small draw prior to the ambush¹. Custer's verdict on the incident was delivered in a letter to his wife: "I have reached the hunter's highest round of fame...I have killed my Grizzly" [2].

During the next 50 years, Europeans driven by a similar lust for blood and glory eradicated grizzly bears from over 90% of the places they once lived in the contiguous United States. Thirty years after that, grizzlies were gone except for in remote enclaves centered on Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks [3]. This epoch coincided with a slaughter perpetrated by Europeans armed with guns, disease, and poison that drove most wildlife bigger than mice and voles nearly to extinction, perpetrated genocide against Indians, and relegated any who survived to Reservations.

The ethos informing this vendetta against nature and natives was one of violence and death, but under the putatively ennobling rhetoric of Manifest Destiny—of Taming the Wilderness to clear the way for White Anglo-Saxon Civilization [5-8]. Those who styled themselves as hunters were at the heart of this enterprise. Thus it was that my ancestors showed up in

¹ For an excellent pictorial history of Custer's Black Hills Expedition, see the book by Ernest Grafe and Paul Horsted entitled "Exploring with Custer" [1].

South Dakota at the end of the 19th Century to lay claim to a seemingly vacant land, emptied of Indians and wildlife, begging to be populated with sheep, cattle, and (more-or-less) God-fearing white people of non-Hispanic descent.

Enter Aldo Leopold and the Legacy of his Ilk

At about this time, Aldo Leopold was sounding the alarm over the demise of Big Game in the Southwest, where he was working for the newly constituted US Forest Service. His remedy was the same as that being espoused by better-known “conservationists” such as Teddy Roosevelt and William Hornaday: protect Big Game from market hunting, supplement feed, and eliminate the predatory varmints [9]. For all of these early conservationists, Big Game referred primarily to large-bodied herbivorous mammals that comprised the stock from which sportsmen could harvest trophies and the occasional meat for the larder. Bears, lions, and wolves were, for the most part, amongst the varmints to be eradicated. And, notably, the core vernacular was agricultural: “harvest,” with the goal of producing “harvestable surpluses” [10].

We had gone from unchecked slaughter of anything that moved to a more restrained and presumably sustainable slaughter of large sexy herbivores, but with a continuing mandate to slaughter any predators that might compete with our opportunities to lay claim to domesticated livestock or a harvestable surplus of large-bodied herbivores [11].

Tragically, this doctrine was grafted on the very bones of the newly professionalized institution of wildlife management, thanks, in part, to the likes of Aldo Leopold. “Sportsmen” were the newly ennobled allies of this undertaking, in fact, the only constituency and clientele that seemingly mattered [12].

So it has remained to this very day, with, over time, sport hunters developing a stranglehold on wildlife management. The only appreciable change during the last 50-70 years has been ever-more enthusiastic invocations of science, both as means of increasing harvestable surpluses—primarily of large sexy herbivores [13]—and, more recently, increasing the legitimacy of an enterprise that looks ever-more corrupt to ever-more people [14-18].

Despotism Institutionalized

Wildlife management is, in fact, one of the most despotic and corrupt of modern-day institutions in America [19]. The ingredients of undemocratic debasement are not subtle. Virtually all of the income for state wildlife management derives from either the sales of hunting and fishing licenses to hunters and fishers or, through federal grants, from taxes on the sales of arms, ammunition, and equipment used for puttering around on lakes and streams [19]. Almost all agency employees and regulators are self-avowed avid hunters, creating a potent cultural amplification for financial dependencies [19]. Almost all hunters, fishers, and wildlife managers are cut of a single demographic cloth: male, non-Hispanic white, and disproportionately rural and less well-educated [19].

It is no wonder that wildlife managers talk about hunters as “clients” and “customers” and give little or no heed to the interests and desires of anyone else. And this by putative public servants charged with serving the public trust [20, 21].

Custer’s lust for blood and glory lives on in the modern-day ethos of sport hunting and wildlife management, to the detriment of anyone who cares about anything else.

Leopold Redux

Interestingly, Aldo Leopold sounded the alarm about wildlife management shortly after establishing its foundations. He soon became concerned about the extent to which this new profession had become slaved to the narrow interests of hunters, to the neglect of all others. As he stated in his 1940 essay on *The State of the Profession*:

“Someday the hunter will learn that hunting and fishing are not the only wildlife sports; that the new sports of ecological study and observation are as free to all now as hunting was to Daniel Boone. These new sports depend on the retention of rich flora and fauna... There is a growing number of private sanctuaries, private arboreta, and private research stations, all of which are groping toward non-lethal forms of outdoor recreation” [22].

Not long after, in 1948, Aldo died.

The Cult of Sport Hunting

Leopold’s concerns seemed to die with him, at the same time that the incestuously intertwined pursuits of hunting and wildlife management became increasingly cult-like. The central ethos of this cult was, and continues to be, death, violence, and domination, linked to long-standing cultural obsessions going back to European settlement of North America [13]. No one has described this syndrome better than Richard Slotkin in his epic treatises *The Fatal Environment* [5], *Gunfighter Nation* [6], and *Regeneration through Violence* [7]. In this tripartite overview, Slotkin clearly links our national obsession with domination and death to chronic collective anxieties arising from colonization, industrialization, and imperialism.

But, of course, every cult needs a justifying if not ennobling myth which, in this case, is a racially-charged manifesto extolling the virtues of European conquest and dominance—even unto this day. Of more direct relevance to my argument here, derivative myths extoll the masculine virtues of white male hunters, hearkening back to Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Teddy Roosevelt [6, 7, 23]. A recent mythic gloss has been provided by a codified doctrine and formula called The North American Model of Wildlife Management [24]. Increasingly, those worshipping at the altar of sanctified violence directed at animals invoke this creed as justification, not only for their behavior, but also for their privileged status within the institution of wildlife management—for the perpetuation of despotism.

Rigid Maladaptive Institutions

The problem with despotic institutions is that they only rarely adapt constructively to changing environments. Instead, the pattern is one of entrenchment against emerging threats at the enthusiastic behest of those who are most privileged by established arrangements. The result is an increasingly brittle institution destined for catastrophic failure, much like the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s.

This, then, becomes a problem, not only for those who are disenfranchised and demanding change, but also, ultimately, for those who hold the greatest prerogatives. And, yet, those holding power, obsessed with retaining privilege and blinded by justifying narratives, double down in defiance of irresistible change.

What About Change?

The American public is, in fact, evincing increased alienation from the precepts of current wildlife management. A 2018 nationwide Economist/YouGov survey showed that 71% of those who were polled thought that sport hunting was morally wrong; 76% thought that killing animals for furs was unethical; both within a 3% margin of error [25]. I'm not saying here that a super-majority of the American public "did not support" or "skeptically viewed" sport hunting. They felt something stronger. They thought it was unethical, even morally repugnant. And this objection, even revulsion, was exhibited across all age groups and political perspectives.

Similarly, the number of adults who hunt has declined since the early 1990s, not just as a percentage of the total, but also in absolute numbers. A survey conducted at 5 to 10-year intervals by the US Census Bureau at the behest of the US Fish & Wildlife Service found that hunter numbers dropped from 13 to 12, to 10-11, to 9% of all surveyed adult males [26, 27, 28]. Between 1991 and 2016, absolute numbers dropped 20% [28, 29]. When adjusted for inflation, revenues generated by hunting similarly declined. By contrast, numbers of people who considered themselves "wildlife watchers"—who valued animals simply to watch them—increased by 37%, and consistently outnumbered hunters by 6- to 9-fold.

Those who are morally repulsed by sport hunting or simply choose not to participate in hunting for whatever reasons, are finding their voice. With increasing frequency, letters to the editor are objecting to hunting—especially "sport" or "trophy" hunting. Membership in organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is burgeoning. Other groups such as [**Project Coyote**](#), focused on protection of predators, are flourishing. More and more people are talking about reforming wildlife management, especially as practiced by State agencies, exemplified by a newly-founded organization called [**Wildlife for All**](#).

Demands for change are becoming more common, more vocal, more insistent, and more unavoidable.

A Predictable Response

What has been the response of hunters and wildlife management bureaus to this crisis of credibility, support, and finances? What you would expect from despots and their allies: increasingly strident public denunciation of critics and insistent denial of their claims.

Moreover, rather than distancing themselves from sport and trophy hunting, wildlife managers are ever more exuberantly embracing it, seemingly as a symbolic act of defiance (for example, see [30, 31]). There is no better example of this phenomenon than the current dogged push by the states of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming to hunt grizzly bears in the long-isolated Yellowstone population, despite overwhelming national opposition and disapproval [25].

One peculiar aspect of this reactionary exhibition is the frequent often over-stated invocation of “science” by hunters and wildlife managers as justification for trophy or sport hunting [32, 33]. Science-based management is, in fact, one of the purported pillars of the much-extolled North American Model of Wildlife Management. Trophy hunting is thus represented as “scientific” whereas objections to trophy hunting are represented as “emotional.” Examples are legion, including a seminal 2018 letter to the editor of the Cody Enterprise in support of Wyoming’s planned grizzly bear hunt [34].

Pseudo-Scientific Hunting

But science does not support trophy hunting grizzly bears, nor does it support sport hunting of essentially any large carnivore [35]. Research worldwide, including in the Yellowstone Ecosystem of Wyoming, has shown that large carnivore populations are self-regulating. As a population nears carrying capacity, self-regulating dynamics kick-in with ever-increasing vigor. There is no science-based justification for hunting grizzly bears in Yellowstone or anywhere else.

A recent survey of conservation scientists and professionals from around the world provides further support for this contention [36]. The survey asked respondents to, first, rank the comparative effectiveness of different methods for promoting coexistence between large carnivores and people, and, second, score various methods according to whether they were more or less justified for increasing human safety. Hunting was scored the least effective of 12 candidate strategies for promoting coexistence and the least justified of all methods for increasing human safety.

This professional consensus flies in the face of reasons being offered, for example, by hunters, wildlife managers, and the Safari Club for hunting grizzly bears. Science-based? Not really. Even Aldo Leopold, back in the 1930s and 1940s, would have probably objected to the invocation of science in support of trophy-hunting grizzly bears—one of which he so eloquently eulogized after being killed by a government trapper [37].

Adding weight to this contention, Kyle Artelle and some colleagues published a series of papers that compellingly critiqued the overwrought invocation of science by hunters and wildlife managers [38, 39, 40]. Kyle and his co-authors decided to test the proposition that wildlife management in Canada and the United States was, in fact, science-based by looking

at a number of plans produced by wildlife management agencies. Without going into the gory details of their research, they concluded: “These results raise doubt about the purported scientific basis of hunt management across the United States and Canada.” In other words, “science-based” was more often rhetoric than reality, which is consistent with propaganda purveyed by hunters and wildlife managers in the northern Rockies in defense of plans to hunt grizzly bears.

Killing Custer

At this point, convention would have me conclude by providing a litany of practical measures that a pliant institution might undertake to reform itself. However, a litany such as this would be little more than an exercise in futility. There is little if any prospect of wildlife management agencies embarking upon a self-realized program of enlightened reform. Nor are wildlife managers likely to bend to the will of national public preferences in the near future. If anything, the prospects for proactive change have been even further diminished by the extent to which wildlife management has become entangled with polarized national politics. All of the available evidence suggests that virtually all of the male, rural, non-Hispanic white, less-well-educated people who endorse sport hunting also endorse Trump and the despotic anti-democratic forces he stands for [41].

We need revolution, not reform, when it comes to wildlife management. We are hopefully no longer a nation bent on genocide of peoples or wild animals, which gives some cause for hope if we are to overthrow the institutional edifice of wildlife management in America. At a minimum, we need federal policies that empower everyone in this country—urban or rural; white, black, red, or brown; female or male; who cherish animals simply because they exist, or simply because they enjoy watching them. We need policies that acknowledge the sentience and emotions of wild animals and, more practically make provisions for their welfare [42].

To paraphrase James Welch, author of *Killing Custer* [43], my concluding admonition would be to relegate Custer's ethos to the deserved trash-bin of history.

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Sociopolitical Entanglements of State Wildlife Management



by David Mattson
January 2022

During the past few years Mike Manfredo of Colorado State University and a cabal of collaborators have produced some fascinating publications focused on people's views of wildlife and nature [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Much of the funding for the unprecedented surveys reported in these papers was provided by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, or WAFWA, a sort of club for those who run the various agencies in charge of managing wildlife in the West. Perhaps paradoxically, the widely publicized results of Manfredo's research team served more than anything else to throw into sharp relief the existential threat posed to WAFWA's members and the hunters they serve by broadscale social, cultural, and geopolitical trends in the United States.

In what follows, I start by summarizing some key results from Manfredo's publications, which sets the stage for then delving into not only what these results say about the legitimacy and sustainability of current institutional arrangements for managing wildlife in the United States, but also how these arrangements manifest an increasingly problematic worldview entangled with geopolitics, ideologies, and culture wars. An endeavor seemingly as mundane as wildlife management mirrors our broader societal struggles over not only how we treat non-human animals, but also how we treat each other—often expressed in strident moral certitudes.

State Wildlife Management in a Nutshell

Returning to Manfredo *et al*, they show an increasing mismatch between the culture and practices of state wildlife managers and the public they purport to serve [1, 2, 3, 5]. I use the word “purport” because, despite public protestations to the contrary, wildlife managers seem to run their government agencies as if they were for-profit enterprises selling customers opportunities to kill wild animals. In service of this purpose, wildlife populations are expressly viewed as an agricultural crop from which to produce a “harvestable surplus.” The customers for this product are overwhelming male and non-Hispanic whites, of which an influential minority are rich members of trophy hunting organizations such as The Safari Club (for details see Essay 2 in this series [7]). With varying degrees of frankness, wildlife managers have told me on numerous occasions that no one else really matters.

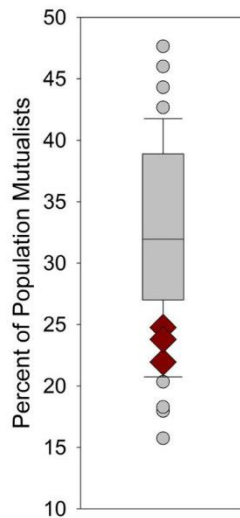
A point of clarification is probably warranted. Government agencies are supposed to serve the public trust [8, 9]. Wildlife managers often loudly claim to serve the public trust, but with little evidence for this contention. Instead, the preponderance of what we know shows that wildlife managers almost exclusively serve the special interests of between 4 and 20% of adults who hunt or fish and who happen to live within the arbitrary boundaries of a given state. Everyone else—disproportionately women and people of color—has no figurative vote in how wild animals are managed¹. If you happen to live in another state, you are unapologetically disenfranchised—unless you are wealthy enough to afford an expensive trophy hunt outfitted by local guides.

Manfredo *et al* in a Nutshell

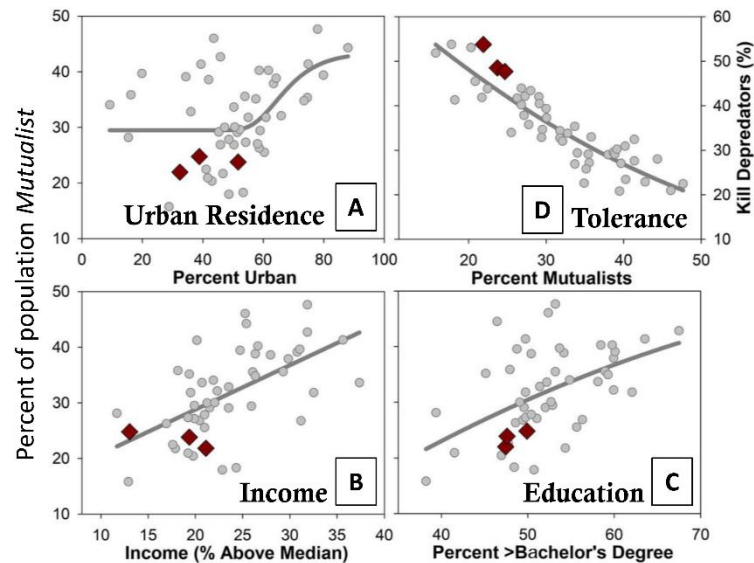
Manfredo and his team organized their research around a schematic that describes how people value wildlife. Their most diagnostic categories—*Mutualist* and *Traditionalist*—describe, first, people who believe wildlife should be accommodated and respected as fellow sentient beings and, second, those who believe wild animals exist to be dominated and used by humans. Of specific relevance to this essay, the demographic, geospatial, and attitudinal profiles of these categories provide a point of entry into powerful cultural-social-political dynamics lurking beneath the veil of wildlife management.

Very briefly, Manfredo *et al* show that self-identified hunters and the wildlife managers who serve them are far more likely to see wildlife as objects to dominate and use compared to the rest of the American public [2]. Perhaps self-evidently, there is not only a strong positive correlation between hunting and the impulse to dominate, but also support for lethal management of any predator implicated in depredation on livestock [2, 4]. Manfredo *et al* also found a negative correlation between the proportion of people holding *Traditionalist* views and levels of education, income, and urbanization, albeit for data aggregated to the level of states [4]. The converse was true for those holding *Mutualist* views. The graphs on the following page, extracted from [2] and [4], show some of these relationships.

¹ Of relevance to this point, Responsive Management, a company that specializes in surveys for wildlife management agencies and hunters, reported in 2019 [10] that women and people of color were far less supportive of hunting and trapping compared to white men—a result that has been shown by virtually every other survey that differentiates race, ethnicity, and gender.



The graphic at left is a box plot showing the overall distribution of percentages for Mutualists in each of the 50 U.S. states based on data extracted from Manfredo et al. (2018) [2]. The horizontal line in the middle of the gray box denotes the median value for all U.S. states. The upper and lower bounds of the gray box encompass 75% of the state-specific values, whereas the gray dots denote extreme high or low values. The burgundy triangles show values for Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, all of which are well below the lower bound for the majority of states.



The x-y diagrams in (A)-(C) show relations between percent Mutualists in each state on the y- or vertical axis and, in (A), percent of state residents living in urban areas; in (B), percent of state incomes above the national median; and, in (C) percent of adults with a minimum Bachelor's degree education—all on the x- or horizontal axis. As in the figure above, burgundy triangles show values for Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, all of which are on or below the line showing the dominant national trend. All of these relations are positive, but with percent Mutualists in the three northern Rockies states below what one might expect based on the national average for each explanatory variable. The x-y diagram in (D) shows the relation between percent Mutualists on the x-axis and, on the y-axis, percent of residents who think any predator that preys on livestock should be killed, which can be interpreted as a proxy for tolerance. In this case, values for Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming are above the national trend line, suggesting a greater willingness on the part of state residents to kill depredators compared to what one might expect from the overall relationship.

Without leaping over too many causal connections, it is reasonable to conclude from this research that non-Hispanic white men from communities of poorer less-educated people living in rural areas are more likely to hunt and favor lethal control of predators—all rooted in worldviews featuring domination and use of nature. Importantly, this subpopulation is a small minority compared to the majority who tend to be non-white, Hispanic, female, urban, better educated, more affluent, far less likely to hunt, more supportive of predators—and more likely to see the intrinsic or existence value of wild animals.

Manfredo *et al* in Context

What Manfredo and his collaborators found is, moreover, wholly consistent with relations documented by numerous researchers working at multiple scales on multiple issues throughout the world, which lends the credibility of manifold replication to the Manfredo *et al* publications. The illuminated patterns are real and important.

In fact, when Manfredo's research is integrated into our larger corpus of scientific knowledge related to how people view wild animals we find a vivid portrait of hunters, the wildlife managers who serve them, their shared culture, and the institutions that they've built—all of which is evident in iconography of the online and print hunting media (for example, see [11-17]). More to the point of this essay, one can find a compelling explanation for why predators such as wolves and grizzly bears are often treated as competitors, impediments, threats, and even vermin by those who are putatively entrusted with managing our wildlife. It is not a pretty picture.

In short, state wildlife management is dominated by non-Hispanic white men, most of whom are self-professed political conservatives [18]. People of color show up primarily as objects of ridicule and objectification. Wild animals are featured largely as vicious predators or as trophies with large sex-linked organs that seemingly exist primarily for entitled white men to kill as means of enhancing self-perceived potency (for the best diagnosis off all this see [16]). Production of wild animals is self-evidently for the purpose of them being killed, with little room for participation in wildlife management by those who don't hunt and fish, all under the covering rhetoric of the "[North American Model of Wildlife Conservation](#)."

This profile is well-supported, not only by the relevant research, but also by my lived experience. I grew up among hunters, have interacted closely with wildlife managers most of my life, and have undertaken pertinent research and analysis, including a close examination of imagery in popular hunting and outdoors magazines (for more details, see Essay 3 in this compilation [17], plus Section E of the report "[Efficacies and effects of sport hunting grizzlies](#)" [19]). The picture I paint here is *not* the result of idle speculation.

Hunting, Hunters, and Trump

The culture of hunting and hunters is, at root, unambiguously about masculinity, violence, domination, self-enhancement, the non-Hispanic white race, and exclusion of people who have different worldviews—emphasizing that this describes a culture, not all people who hunt. It is thus not surprising that our institutions of wildlife management are bastions for

non-Hispanic white men, most of whom prize killing animals and work to perpetuate despotic undemocratic arrangements that exclude people who are different [17].

This should sound familiar. In fact, the cultural, demographic, and psychological profile of those involved in hunting is strikingly similar to the profile of those who voted for Donald Trump during 2016 and 2020. As I noted in [a 2018 essay](#), “Trump voters were far more Islamophobic, sexist, racist, and prejudiced against anyone perceived to be sexually deviant. They were also far more likely to support an authoritarian leader (e.g., Trump) as well as measures to secure their privileged group status, which aligned with the fact that they were more likely to be white, male, and self-identified Christians.” Research since 2018 has only reinforced this conclusion, but with additional emphasis on factors such as white Christian nationalism, xenophobia, generalized fear, and the amplifying effects of social malaise in communities of poor white people [for example, see [20]-[27)].



Culture Wars and Carnivore Management

Given this convergence, it is perhaps not surprising that wildlife management has become entangled with culture wars organized around attempts by non-Hispanic white men to perpetuate their historical privileged status in America—even to the extent of ditching democracy and embracing authoritarianism. And this entanglement is nowhere more evident than in efforts by state-level politicians and wildlife managers in the northern US Rockies to wrest authority over management of wolves and grizzly bears away from the federal government—successfully in the case of wolves, on-going in the case of grizzly bears.

The symbolic stakes are high. Wolves and grizzly bears are no longer simply wild animals living relatively pedestrian lives, they are symbols in a cultural war (for a sampler of the relevant literature see [28]-[32]). For many non-Hispanic white men imbued with the need to dominate and subjugate, these large carnivores are clearly symbols of affluent well-educated urbanites, aided and abetted by people who are racially, ethnically, and sexually different,

imposing alien values and worldviews under auspices of the federal Endangered Species Act. In other places and times, this would probably be cause to start killing people. Lacking official sanction for such acts—at least for the time being—*Traditionalists* in the West and the politicians who serve them are very plausibly displacing thwarted desires to punish those who directly threaten them onto the wild animals that they symbolize; notably, wolves, grizzly bears, and other predators such as coyotes².



Hence, I would argue, we have the current slaughter of wolves in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, and aggressive efforts by state officials to wrest authority over grizzly bear management away from the federal government and institute a punitive management regime featuring trophy hunting. Even if you can't physically harm the people who pose an existential threat—and get away with it—perhaps you *can* kill the animals they symbolize.

The Geographic Context

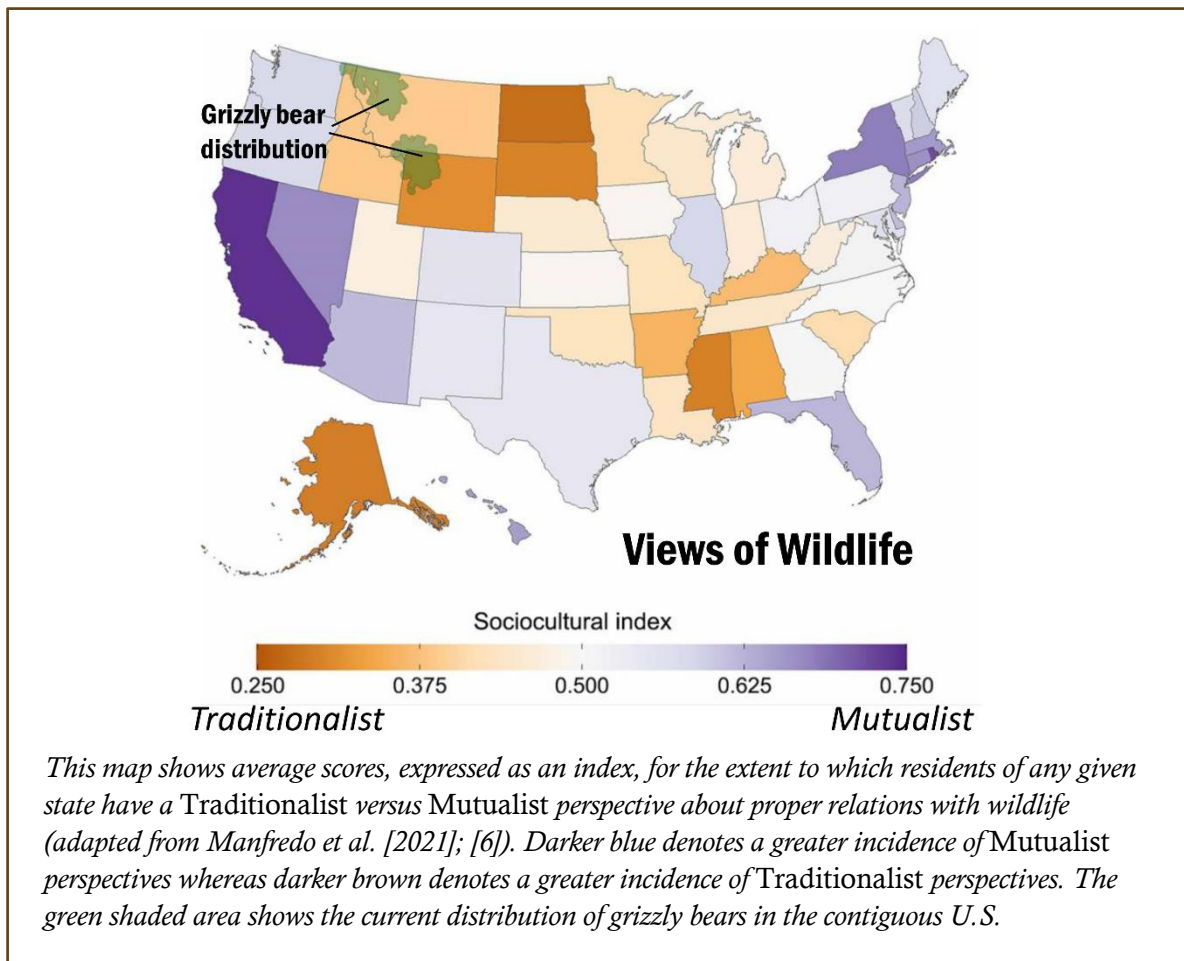
This brings me to a closer look at controversies over management of wolves and grizzly bears in the northern Rocky Mountain states of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. These three states matter because nearly all the grizzly bears and many of the wolves left in the lower-48 live here. This juxtapose of symbolically supercharged species such as grizzlies and wolves—both of which have national and even international constituencies—with a regressive social-political regional environment offers the perfect brew for conflict with geopolitical and ideological dimensions.

Returning to the Manfredo *et al* publications, they provide helpful maps in several papers showing the proportional distribution of people with *Mutualist* and *Traditionalist* worldviews at the scale of both states and counties [6]. For those interested in conservation of large carnivores, several patterns are noteworthy. Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana have some of

² Of relevance here, the same 2019 report referenced under footnote 1 [10] showed that over 60% of their survey respondents opposed the hunting of large carnivores such as wolves, mountains, black bears and grizzly bears, with this percentage *higher* for residents in the West and among women and people of color. Opposition was even stronger yet when the primary motive was to obtain a trophy, which is almost invariably the case when people hunt large carnivores.

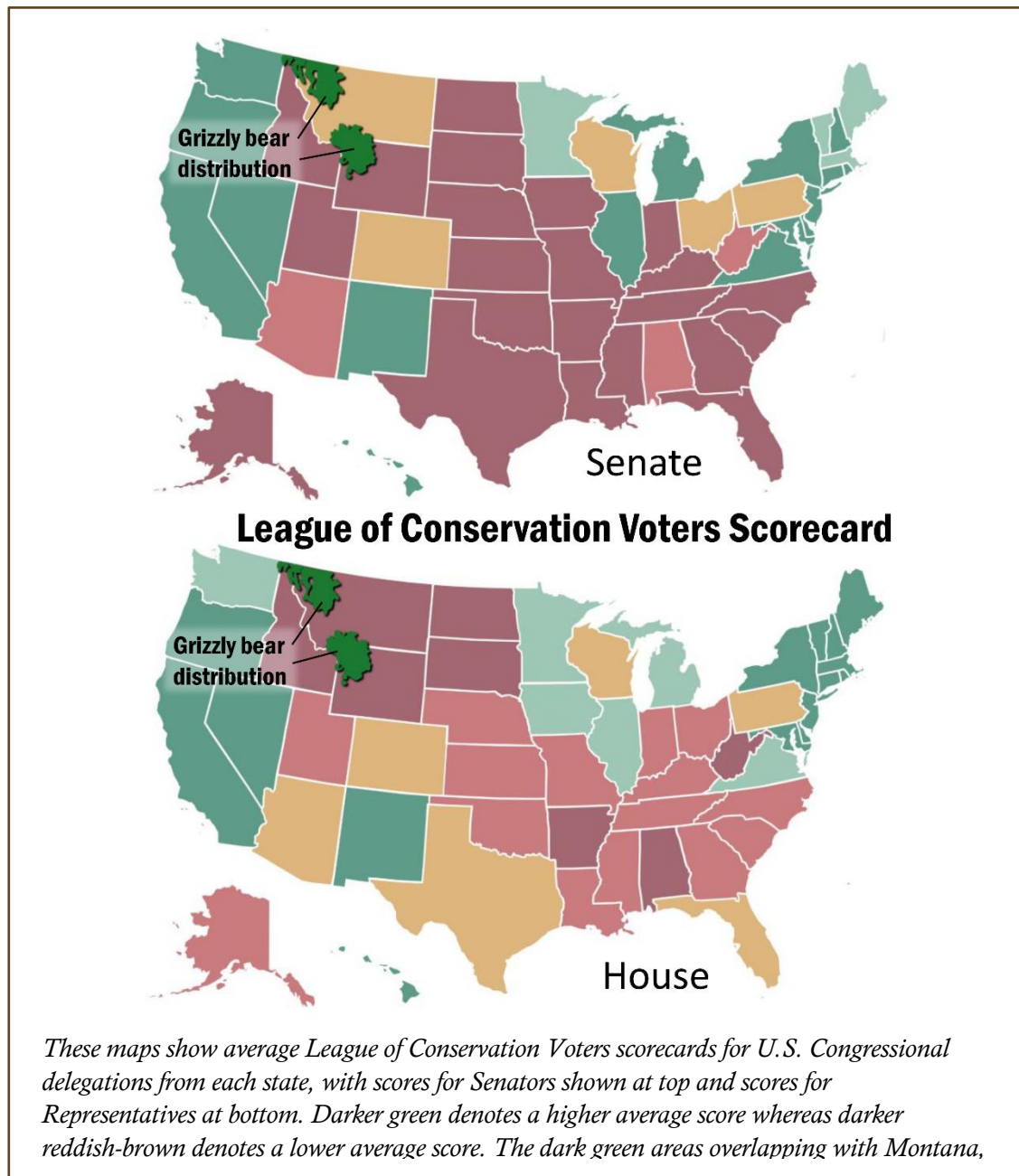
the highest proportions of residents espousing *Traditionalist* perspectives in the country and, moreover, within each state, grizzlies and wolves occupy counties with some of the highest concentrations of *Traditionalists* of all.

Again, *Traditionalists* are the most likely of any of Manfredo's groups to hunt and support lethal control of depredators, which is consistent with a large body of prior research showing the same for rural residents. This prior research also highlights the extent to which hunters are hostile, or at best ambivalent, not only towards predators, but also urbanites—at times and in places manifest in poaching as an act of social protest (for example, see [33]-[36]). In short, our wolves and grizzlies are attempting to survive in highly lethal environments.



Perhaps not surprisingly, this prevalence of regressive views of wild animals is mirrored in the domination of state governments by Republicans in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho—Senate, House, and Governor's office—and the presence of only one Democrat in a collective tri-state Congressional delegation of ten. Needless to say, the remaining nine are Republicans. The average League of Conservation Voters scorecard for these nine Republicans comes in at an astoundingly low 4-½ out of a possible 100%—in contrast to the 88% score of our single Democrat, Senator John Tester of Montana [37]. The maps on the next page summarizing League of Conservation Scorecards for each state's Congressional

delegation say it all. Even for Republicans, low scores such as those accrued by our regional delegation require exceptional ill-will and ideological commitment to destroying the natural environment—as well as, perhaps unintentionally, future generations who will depend on it.



Recovering Carnivores in a Toxic Regional Environment

The upshot of these patterns is clear. We are trying to recover nationally important endangered species—including wolves—in one of the more politically and culturally toxic regional environments in the United States. There is a reason why wolves and grizzlies were driven nearly to extinction, saved only by the presence of exceptionally large wilderness

areas and protections offered by the Endangered Species Act [38]. Hunters would almost certainly still be tracking down a diminishing number of grizzlies outside of National Parks to kill them for wall trophies if authority had remained in the hands of state governments and state wildlife managers.

But there is an additional factor that injects yet more venom into this already toxic human brew: ideologically-infused geopolitics. Some of the most ardent fans of grizzly bears and wolves as well as their most outspoken proponents in Congress live outside of the northern Rockies, often in “blue” states on either coast. Supporters of these carnivores have also routinely thwarted efforts by state politicians to gain management authority over wolves and grizzlies by invoking the *federal* Endangered Species Act...in *federal* court. Taken together, these two factors have undoubtedly served to frustrate and even enrage regional ideologues and politicians by depriving them of power and subjugating them to the prerogatives of people with different political loyalties and alien views of wildlife and nature.

Over time, management of grizzlies and wolves has become ever more entangled with identity politics, ideological divisions, and the perennial struggle over state’s “rights” versus federal authority. Fuel has been added to the figurative fire.

Removing Endangered Species Act Protections?

All of this provides context for the widely-publicized push by politicians from Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana to remove ESA protections for grizzly bears and return management authority to the states. News about adoption of an agreement by wildlife managers from the three states that describes measures to conserve the Yellowstone grizzly bear population, while at the same time instituting a trophy hunt, has been on the mast-head of regional and national media along with the announcement of petitions filed by the governments of Montana and Wyoming to remove ESA protections.

The public relations machines of the involved Governor’s offices have clearly been working overtime. But this tax-payer funded media push has been abetted by the complicity of journalists and their editors. These arbiters of the Fourth Estate invariably fail to provide a critique of the promoted agenda or a description of all-important context—which is partly my impetus for writing this essay.

One glaring omission in this media coverage is any mention of the on-going slaughter of wolves under state management, the planned slaughter of even more, and the recent passage of state legislation designed to give a figurative middle finger to people who care about grizzly bears and the federal managers currently charged with recovering them. We are apparently left to fill the journalistic vacuum with assumptions about the presumed good intentions of those pushing for removal of ESA protections. And, perhaps even more problematic, the vast majority of people in this country who care about wolves and grizzlies have little insight into the regional context of the Northern Rockies or the deeply institutionalized problems of state wildlife management.

Facing the Future

So, where does this leave the majority in our country who want thriving populations of wolves and grizzly bears and who view wild animals as sentient fellow travelers on an increasingly threatened planet? Or, similarly, where does this leave the multitudes of woman, Hispanics, and people of color who are being disenfranchised by non-Hispanic white men desperately clinging to power, even at the expense of our democracy? As I hope this essay makes clear, both these existential issues are rooted in the same socio-political-cultural dynamics.

Without stretching the point, institutions we have for managing wildlife in the Northern Rockies are a portent for what we could have, nationally, if certain people in this country prevail: a despotic system of governance designed to exclusively serve the interests of non-Hispanic white men looking to the past as a sort of white supremacist Christian ideal—with the natural world and everyone else prostrate at their feet. I don't have the space here to share much of my perspective on this larger struggle, although, obviously, if we lose our fight for democracy, management of large carnivores will be of little comparative importance.

Assuming that our edifice of democracy survives, there are several important issues that those who care about grizzly bears—and other wildlife—can engage with. First and foremost is reform of state wildlife management to be more inclusive, democratic, and respectful of the diversity of worldviews held by people in America. Perhaps the most straight-forward means of promoting reform is by diversifying revenues for state wildlife agencies. As important, agency cultures need to be transformed. Workforces need to be diversified. Governing commissions need to be comprised of people who truly represent how we value wildlife. More specific to grizzly bears and wolves, federal Grizzly Bear and Wolf Protection Acts, similar to the federal Bald Eagle Protection Act, could provide everyone in America a voice in conservation of these species in perpetuity³.

But my focus here is not on specific ways to improve management of wildlife. This topic has been covered in depth elsewhere by numerous thoughtful and well-informed people. Rather, my main purpose has been to perhaps clarify the obvious. Management of our endangered large carnivores, including Jackson Hole's beloved Bear 399, doesn't occur in a vacuum. The challenges that these animals and those who care about them face are configured by powerful cultural, social, political, and institutional forces that need to be recognized if they are to be effectively addressed.

Perhaps most important of all, the fates of grizzlies and wolves are inextricably linked to the fate of our democratic society and even the Earth itself. We can't afford to be either unrealistic or apathetic. We need to be informed to effectively fight for a system of governance that is inclusive and respectful, not only of the full diversity of our identities and values, but also the well-being and sentience of wild animals.

³ The websites of [Wildlife for All](#) and [Grizzly Times](#) provide much more information for those interested in engaging in efforts to reform state wildlife management.

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