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NEWSLETTER

Featuring updates on grizzly bear conservation activities,
and the latest *Grizzly Times* Blog and Podcast
from [Louisa Willcox and David Mattson, PhD.](#)
Co-Founders of *Grizzly Times*.

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March 16, 2023

Dear Friend of the Grizzly,

Bears are waking up after a long, frigid Montana winter, reminding us that the spring season of renewal has begun. On March 7, a Yellowstone Park biologist spotted the first grizzly bear of the season foraging on a winter-killed bison.

But bears are waking up to renewed threats, as the states of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming continue to press the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to strip endangered species protections for Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide grizzly bears.



Male grizzly waking up.

David has responded to the latest volley by our regional politicians with opinion pieces published in eight regional newspapers. And in the next *Grizzly Times* Newsletter, he will tackle the thorny and central problem of state wildlife management, including what will happen to grizzlies if federal oversight under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is removed. His series of essays on the topic provides the most comprehensive analysis of the problem that has been done on this complex topic.

The *New York Times* published David's Letter to the Editor, below, which provides a succinct summary of the threat of delisting: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/24/opinion/letters/language-college-campuses.html#link-1c316aea>

***New York Times* Opinion Letters**

February 24, 2023

To the Editor:

It was distressing to read "[White House May Remove Protections for Bears](#)" (news article, Feb. 4), outlining efforts by the Republican governors in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho to strip grizzly bears of Endangered Species Act protections and return management to the states.

The governors have pointed to recovering bear numbers and conflicts between humans and bears as justifications for delisting. But, like the ongoing slaughter of gray wolves after that species' delisting, this change will reduce, not recover, grizzly bear populations in the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems.

There are about 2,000 grizzly bears in the lower 48 states now, about 4 percent of the population before 1800. The emerging scientific consensus is that several thousand more bears are needed in a single interbreeding population to guarantee long-term genetic viability. That's not possible if populations are isolated, face currently deteriorating environmental conditions and are subject to risky, often lethal, management by states.

Now is not the time to remove protections for grizzlies. We should be redoubling our commitment to restoring and protecting these icons of the American West—not allowing states to “manage” them through trophy hunting and shoot-on-sight regulations.

David Mattson
Livingston, Mont.

The writer is a wildlife researcher who has studied grizzly bears for 35 years.

David was able to elaborate on his perspectives in longer opinion pieces published in the Bozeman Chronicle, Missoulian, Missoula Current, Billings Gazette, Daily Montanan, Montana Standard, Helena Independent Record, and Counterpunch.

We published the following version as a *Grizzly Times* Blog:

“Now is Not the Time to Remove ESA Protections for Grizzlies.”

<https://www.grizzlytimes.org/single-post/now-is-not-the-time-to-remove-esa-protections-for-grizzlies>

Now is Not the Time to Remove ESA Protections for Grizzlies

By David Mattson, Ph.D.



The governors of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho have been moving Heaven and Earth to hasten removal of ESA protections for grizzly bears and return management to the states, most recently through petitions submitted to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service requesting the initiation of a status review for the species.

Idaho's petition was rejected, but the petitions submitted by Wyoming and Montana were not, triggering a twelve-month process potentially leading to *administrative* removal of ESA protections by the Service.

Meanwhile, Congressional delegations from the northern Rockies have mounted a tandem effort to *legislatively* remove protections. Senators Lummis, Barrasso, Crapo, Risch, and Daines recently introduced legislation that would delist two grizzly bear populations constituting the bulwark of recovery efforts in the contiguous United States. Representatives Hageman and Zinke introduced similar legislation in the House. As was the case with Congressional delisting of wolves in the northern Rockies, this legislation would debar judicial review—a measure that has seemingly become the norm among legislators intent on circumventing the ESA.

Punitive Partisan Politics

Not coincidentally, all these politicians are Republicans. The involved Senators and Representatives also account for some of the worst scores calculated by the League of Conservation Voters. The governors have similar anti-environment bona fides. Governor Gianforte of Montana unabashedly boasts of personally killing wolves and mountain lions, in two instances under circumstances that violated state law. Governor Gordon of Wyoming—the scion of a wealthy east coast family that bought a slice of the western cowboy life for itself—actively condones the widespread anti-carnivore hysteria routinely spouted by his state's citizens.

These efforts by Republican politicians to remove ESA protections for grizzlies are unambiguously partisan and driven by ideology as well as the enduring contest between state's rights and federal authority. They are not about science or empirical evidence, despite recent justifications invoking burgeoning bear numbers and human-bear conflicts. Wyoming's politicians began agitating for removal of ESA protections as early as the 1980s, a mere 10 years after grizzlies were listed under the ESA, and at the undisputed nadir of grizzly bear numbers. State efforts have continued unabated since, recently reinforced by the radical Republican majority in Montana's state legislature—all pretty much regardless of what science has had to say about threats or population status one way or the other.

A Recipe for Risk

Devolution of authority for managing grizzly bears would predictably result in efforts by state managers to reduce sizes of our two largest bear populations in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems, including through use of a trophy hunt. This back-tracking would be exacerbated by plans to punitively manage human-bear conflicts, most of which occur on the periphery of

occupied habitat. Continued isolation of bear populations would be virtually guaranteed by all of these measures.

The kinds of management regimes being crafted by state officials would take us in the wrong direction at the wrong time. Seen through the lens of recent scientific consensus, we are still far from where we need be to insure long-term survival of grizzly bear populations in the contiguous U.S. Even the most optimistic estimates show we currently have little more than 2,000 grizzlies distributed among four isolated or semi-isolated populations. We are far from the 4,000-8,000 contiguous interbreeding bears needed to insure genetic and evolutionary viability.



Grizzly on bull bison carcass (Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team)

Environmental Degradation

And risks have multiplied with the on-going effects of climate change and human population growth. We have already seen losses of native foods either directly or indirectly caused by humans, including near-extirpation of cutthroat trout in Yellowstone Park, near-extirpation of whitebark pine throughout the northern Rockies, and substantial declines of elk populations in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. Most berry-producing shrubs, including huckleberry, are predicted to disappear next, both because of adverse climate change as well as loss of pollinators. All of these species are or were important sources of grizzly bear food.

These losses of native foods have driven grizzlies to increasingly seek anthropogenic foods, often under circumstances that bring them into conflict with people. Exploitation of carrion from hunter-killed elk has led to increased bear deaths during encounters with frightened men carrying large-caliber guns. Increased depredation of livestock has led to predictably lethal responses from ranchers and federal agents operating at their behest. Inundation of valley bottoms by new-comers intent on raising chickens—and not particularly concerned about disposing of their garbage—has spawned conflicts that end up being deadly for the involved bears.

And more of the same is yet to come.

A Missing Perspective

Add to this the perspective of history. Although current grizzly bear numbers are roughly twice those we had in the 1970s and 1980s when grizzlies were critically imperiled, our current numbers are still only 4% of what we had West-wide during the mid-1800s. Although hard-fought implementation of the Endangered Species Act since the mid-1970s has rescued grizzly bears in the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems from their perilous state, populations in the Selkirk Mountains and Cabinet-Yaak region barely survive due to loss of secure habitat and the toll taken by poachers. Only token numbers of grizzlies are present in expansive Recovery Areas centered on central Idaho and the North Cascades of Washington. Elsewhere, grizzlies are still missing from ecosystems they once enriched, including in California, Colorado, and the Southwest—all areas with ample potential habitat.

A Missing Place for Empathy and Inspiration

I grew up in the Black Hills of South Dakota, not too far from where the last grizzlies in the region were killed. Coyotes and white-tailed deer were our largest surviving native mammals. Later during my career as a wildlife researcher, I was able to draw inspiration from witnessing the rescue of our surviving critically imperiled grizzly bear populations.

My field studies also allowed me to experience the magic of grizzly bears through numerous close observations—a magic that millions of visitors to Yellowstone, Grand Teton, and Glacier National Parks have experienced from afar. We are collectively rediscovering what indigenous people have known for a long time: that grizzlies are a source of powerful medicine.



David examining an elk carcass while working in Yellowstone for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.

The management regime being developed by state managers and politicians dismisses out of hand this inspiration offered by grizzlies to millions of people, as well as the values held by most Americans. Delisting would furthermore disenfranchise 99% of the people previously enfranchised by federal law. Instead, grizzlies would be subject to the whims of state wildlife management agencies slaved to conservative politicians and the interests of hunters and livestock producers in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho—despite the fact that, even here, these constituents are a distinct minority.

Not Now

Now is not the time to remove federal Endangered Species Act protections for grizzlies. Their populations are too small and fragmented as well as prey to deteriorating environmental conditions. As important, politicians in the northern Rockies promise imprudent and vengeful management.

If anything, we should be redoubling our commitment to restoring and protecting grizzly bears. The bears as well as the multitudes of people who cherish them deserve no less.

What You Can Do on Behalf of the Bear



Check out our “Take Action” tab on the Grizzly Times website that includes a “Primer” on how to be an effective advocate for grizzlies.

<https://www.grizzlytimes.org/take-action>

The Primer outlines seven arenas where you can make a positive difference. They are:

- **Strengthen US Fish and Wildlife Service’s leadership in recovery of grizzly bears.**
- **Curb destructive activities by the U.S. Forest Service.**
- **Reform anti-carnivore management by wildlife agencies in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.**
- **Buttress the National Park Service’s laudable efforts to keep bears and people safe.**
- **Support efforts by Native American Tribes to play a more meaningful role in grizzly bear recovery.**
- **Expand coexistence efforts on private lands.**
- **Reduce deadly collisions with trains and automobiles.**

This list is long because the management landscape is complex, and protecting bears depends on many complementary actions. Federal, state, and local managers, as well as elected officials and private individuals, shape the conservation arena and determine whether grizzlies live or die. And each agency and elected official operates in a different context, within a particular legal framework.

At its most basic, recovering grizzly bear populations requires that we keep grizzlies alive and protect habitat they depend on. Advancing these goals depends upon caring people speaking up. By voicing your concerns—via social media or, better yet, directly to your elected officials—you send a message that you care about grizzlies and wild nature. Don't forget: officials often do difficult things only because their constituents make them.

Effecting positive change depends on where you are from, your interests and passion, and which landscapes you personally know. Each of us also has a different temperament. For those who are comfortable with conflict, you may opt to engage directly with government decision processes and with managers in state and federal agencies. For those who don't like to be involved directly in contentious situations, support of groups working to protect private lands or promote coexistence might be a better option.

The point is to find an area, arena, or issue that suits your personality and style. Grizzly bear conservation is a huge canvas, with plenty of room for each of us to make our mark.

Please Consider a Gift to *Grizzly Times*...

We need your help! We have retired and are doing this full-time work pretty much gratis—despite the gradual dissolution of our physical bodies.

As we describe in this newsletter, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is yet again making a run at removing ESA protections from grizzly bears—potentially throughout Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. This move has been catalyzed by petitions from the Republican Governors of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho against a backdrop of legislation in all three states designed to persecute carnivores, with wolves targeted for especially vindictive measures. Grizzlies are also being set up for similar treatment if delisted. As always, we have been and will be in the trenches trying to protect grizzlies and the habitats they depend on in this region and elsewhere.

As we do not have our own nonprofit, a not-for-profit tax-deductible organization, Conservation Congress, has agreed to be our fiscal sponsor. (*Thank you, Denise!*)

You can make a one-time contribution or sign up for a monthly donation through this link:

[DONATE HERE](#)

Or, you can mail a donation to:

*Conservation Congress
c/o Denise Boggs
1604 1st Avenue South
Great Falls, Montana 59401*

* Be sure to note that your contribution is for *Grizzly Times* (GT).

Thank you for your continued support—in any way—it is greatly appreciated!

*For the bears,
Louisa and David*