

The Grizzly Beat
Transcript, Episode 13
June, 2016
Barbara Ulrich

Louisa Willcox, Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Beat and you're listening today to Barbara Ulrich. Barbara and her partner runs an eco-tourism business in Gardiner, Montana called Wild Bears Adventures, where they provide visitors a window into the natural world of Greater Yellowstone, and the magic of species such as grizzly bears and bison and wolves. Barbara, can you share some of your first experiences with wild animals that intrigued you?

Barbara Ulrich: Sure, it actually came from my years as a mother. I brought my then 10 year old twins up to Yellowstone right about the time that the wolf reintroduction discussion was going on. And I thought what a great opportunity for them not only to focus on a particular species and learn about them, but also to learn about and participate in the public process.

So we went to a lot of ranger talks. We learned what we could about wolves, and then they wrote letters encouraging U.S. Fish and Wildlife to go ahead with the reintroduction. That was the birth of my interest in wolves and other critters as the years went by.

GT: So you were here or you witnessed that reintroduction when it occurred?

BU: Well I was located down in Colorado where I had lived for 30 years and worked. And I didn't have the opportunity to actually be on the ground when they brought wolves into Yellowstone, but I certainly was coming up to Yellowstone frequently so that I was here during those first years. And saw my first wolf in the Lamar valley in, I think it was '98 by the time I actually saw the first wolves. It was a member of the Druid Peak Pack and really a pivotal moment in my own life to see that happen.

GT: That was sort of a badass pack too.

BU: It was. They were around for a long time and it was certainly fun. I have had a lot of experience with them not only seeing those first wolves come in but also ultimately to come up here and teach with Yellowstone Association, and bring visitors who came to Yellowstone to see wolves, bring them out into the valley, and to discuss the history of the Druid pack, and maybe see some of the members of the pack while they were here in Yellowstone. And so they were around for a long time and a really pivotal focus of the wolf reintroduction here in Yellowstone.

GT: Just to continue on that theme, you're a guide and interpreter. And the Yellowstone landscape is vast and subtle, and difficult for a casual visitor to grasp its ecological complexities. As a guide and educator, what do you think are some of the best ways to share this landscape with wildlife for newcomers? And maybe you can share an anecdote or two along those lines.

BU: Okay, that is a challenge, the largeness of the landscape. And I think it's a mistake for people who come here and think that they're going to "do" Yellowstone on this summer visit or whatever, because it is so diverse. And I find as a guide, frequently I have people just for one day, like an 8-hour tour, and to be able to give them a glimpse into some of the subtleties of the landscape, I find it absolutely imperative to get off the beaten path, even if it's just for a half an hour or a little hike, depending upon their ability. To get off the road away from road noise, away from other people and look at something that's really maybe a finer point in the landscape. Or you might observe a small animal but that's scared away by all of the activity along the roadside.

And we have certain short little places that we have our secret little hikes off the road and if we can get folks up and away, I can't predict what we'll see, but you might see a bluebird, or you might see a pine marten, or a little squirrel. And then that just seems to stimulate conversation where you can talk a little bit about how that particular animal fits into the larger picture. Or you might see willows or something, vegetation, so that you can just really focus on how complex this ecosystem really is. And that the wolves and the bears are the draw -- that's why people come up here, they want to see the wolves and the bears -- but to understand that those animals are part of a much more intricate and complex system. That's the real meat of what we're trying to help people understand and enlighten them about that.

GT: That's great. What do you think for you have been perhaps the biggest challenges with eco-tourism?

BU: I think as I've become a member of the community here -- so I ultimately moved out of the Denver metro area and I've retired up here and I own a home, and I'm part of a small community. And it's a diverse community of human beings. We have obviously a lot of people who live near the Park are involved in some way in the Park, but we also have people here who are involved in other components of this wild landscape.

We have ranchers and we have outfitters, and folks who really, I think, just go about their lives and don't pay a whole lot of attention to some of the hot button issues around here. And I think as a member of the community, I've found that it's been perhaps frustrating at times feeling that because I identify as a wildlife watcher or a member of the conservation community that I am somehow misunderstood, that my intentions are perhaps misunderstood.

And I found that developing a sort of sensitivity to what other people, what their needs are with respect to the wildlife itself, it has been really very important. And I've really tried to expand my mind and think from their perspective from time to time, and I have found that to be very very helpful. And I think when other people see you do that or feel that you're doing that, or you're trying to understand where they're coming from, that that has been helpful in coming together as a community and addressing some really very important issues about wildlife and living with them, and how to manage them in the future.

GT: Barbara, you've now been part of the community around Gardiner, which is right on the doorstep of Yellowstone Park, for quite some time, and you've had a chance to watch and be part of a sometimes heated discussions on species like bison and wolves, which are protected inside the Park but not outside. And you've talked about being part of the community, but have you also seen the debate in the community change over time?

BU: I've only been here for 10 years but I think there has been a lot of change. And I can speak from the perspective of having been and still am very involved in Bear Creek Council, which is a small grassroots community group here in Gardiner -- and one that I had the privilege to lead for a couple of years. And I have seen as the topics that come across, the headlines of the newspaper around here change, that people have, I believe, expanded somewhat their approach to how we think about some of these issues.

And in particular, I've had experience with wolves coming off of the endangered species list, and now they're being managed by the state of Montana. And in particular, I'm talking about the state of Montana. They're also being managed in other states differently.

And I was really very fortunate to be able to have a private meeting with Governor Bullock when I was president of Bear Creek Council. And what I think is very useful in those situations is to not be so adamant for your cause that you can't understand the needs of other stakeholders.

Our request has always been to Fish, Wildlife and Parks here in Montana that people who are in the conservation community, ecotourism, people who very much have their livelihood involved in wolves being on the landscape here in Montana near and in the northern part of the Park, and helping people understand how hunting near the Park could really very negatively impact those activities.

I have found that other stakeholder groups are listening now. They're beginning to understand that what they do and what their needs are can negatively impact others, and so I think that's tremendous progress. That's not to say that there aren't those who kind of will just adhere to that old sort of mentality that, "I think the same way my grandfather did, which was good enough for him, so it's good enough for me," and they're just not willing to listen. But I would say that there are a good number of people who truly are willing to listen and understand times are changing and needs are changing -- bears and other peoples'. And I think that's a tremendous plus and it gives me a lot of hope for the future.

GT: That's great. One of the components of the change that we're all seeing here in the Northern Rockies is the economics. And as you know better than anyone, the economic drivers of the Northern Rockies are no longer exploitative industries as they were, such as logging and mining, but as you say and as you make your living, but tourism and people moving to this region for the abundance of wildlife and wilderness and Parks and such.

Can you talk about your view of this transition, and what it may mean to the future of wildlife, grizzly bears, wolves, bison, and other species?

BU: That's a conundrum. That sort of expression that you can just love something to death, I think. Our economy here in sort of north of the Park in this part of Montana -- the Paradise Valley, Gardiner, Emigrant, and even up into Bozeman -- is I think very much driven by tourism. We've seen numbers increase dramatically of tourists that come just to see Yellowstone, and they're usually on a longer expedition that might include Glacier and some of the other parks in the West. And as I take people into the Park, and as I mentioned wanting to get off the beaten path a little bit, it is very concerning the number of people that are coming and the impact that they're having on the Park resources. And that's a whole part of planning that really really needs to be addressed, not just by the Park Service but by our community.

How do we handle these folks that want to come, and have every right to come, and to give them a quality experience? And I think it's a tremendous challenge for us.

I have come here and I've purchased a property that was built in the 80s, but none the less, there are people who come and they want to build, or there's a competition between people who want to live here and people who want to rent here during the summer. So housing has always been an issue. And I don't think there are any really easy answers about it.

I think we really have to understand ultimately what our impact on the ecosystem is and understand very clearly, that there's a point beyond which we could impact it such that the animals won't be around -- and it will ultimately put us all out of business. It's a really key, development and visitor use, how we use the landscape is a huge challenge that we better give a lot of thought to for the future.

GT: But it's very clear that the economic drivers of Gardiner and communities around Yellowstone are tourism, and it is the goose that lays the golden egg in a positive way. And it seems to me that that itself is changing the debate about protection of the Park and the ecosystem. Can you talk a little bit about that?

BU: Yes, I think people who come here -- one of the advantages I think that anyone has in making an argument about any topic is to be really well informed. And as part of our work at Bear Creek Council, or even when I'm dealing with folks who come near and are on a Wild Bear Adventure, that having the most recent information that's available, putting forth education about those things, is really important.

And what I'm getting at is that when we start looking at the economic drivers here, when we start realizing that people come to Montana to bird watch, and they're far more people who come here to watch birds than there are people who come here to hunt, for example. We need to understand that, and know those statistics and be plugged into that information, because that's the sort of baseline of information that we need to make the kinds of decisions that we need to make for planning for our future.

And so if we continue to have our community focused on sort of a dying industry -- and I think people will always come here to hunt, they'll always come here to fish -- but we have this whole new ecotourism component of people who are interested in learning about ecosystems, about how they work, about the large players. They may be city dwellers, they may have to exist in the suburbs of some large city in the United States, or outside the United States, and they come here to be able to experience something that's very different and that they perceive as very precious. And so for us to be able to kind of preserve that for them is very very important, not only as something that's sort of an intrinsic human need to be in touch with wilderness but also for our economy to be able to provide that experience for people. Because if we can't do that, I don't know where else anyone is going to go to experience that.

GT: That's right. So Barbara, speaking of your meetings with the governor and such, you've been involved in efforts to change state wildlife management policy outside the Park. And you have had some really significant success, reducing the number of wolves getting hunted on the border of the Park and in other ways. Can you share your thoughts on what you think are some of the key ingredients of your successes?

BU: Sure, We really have at Bear Creek Council, again this is this group that I work through. And I think our success has been tied largely to persistence.

I actually remember when I met the governor, I said I was so pleased to meet him, and I said: "And this won't be the last time you'll be hearing from me," and clearly it was not. And so we attend meetings, and we speak when there's public comment, and we keep ourselves up to date on what's going on, and what other groups who are pro or con are focusing on. And largely I would say our success has been because we have been very reasonable in our requests.

We were very fortunate to have a lot of scientists in our community and in our Bear Creek Council who are up on the latest papers, and they understand wolf pack dynamics. And so we have a lot of insight that way, so we can really support our arguments with good science, the most recent science, that's been very helpful too.

So always though I feel we've been reasonable in our requests. And specifically one of our biggest successes was that we were able to get Fish Wildlife and Parks to agree to limit the number of wolves that can be taken out of two hunting units that exist just north of Yellowstone National Park. And further we were able to have limits on the number of wolves that each hunter could take. And in Montana each hunter can take five wolves. But here in these two hunting units north of the Park, they're only allowed to take one wolf. And the reason we were able to get that through I believe, largely is because we were able to make the argument about the impact, that taking more than one wolf at a time from a pack that is probably frequenting both the Park and the northern part of the northern range here outside of the Park, is absolutely devastating. And that's not an emotional argument. That is a scientific argument. And so we were able to back up our request with the latest information and I think that sells very well -- that we're not going

in saying "we love wolves and we don't want anybody to kill them." And we may, that may be the case, but what we're saying this is what we know about wolves. This is what we know is good, and this is what we know is bad. And so we're just asking you to use reason and to understand that there are a lot of people here in our community who are going to be negatively impacted if the wolves disappear in the northern range of the Park. That in a nutshell has been our measure of success I believe.

GT: That's great. So Barbara, you've gone back to graduate school in mid life and you're now studying climate change with a paleo-ecologist through the lens of microbes that show up in bison poop. Can you share a little bit about your decision to do that and what you're hoping to find in your research?

BU: Sure. It is an unusual thing to do as part of your retirement plan. And I have to tell you it was not really a plan that I had. Most of all of this that's happened since my retirement has not been a plan that I ever had. But I do know opportunity when I see it. And there's a wonderful researcher at Montana State University. Her name is Kathy Whitlock, and I'd heard of her over the years and was following some of her research. I know she's very active here in the Yellowstone area. And I had an opportunity to take class with her, and I took advantage of that, and it was kind of like I was hooked. I was definitely hooked. I love learning. I've always loved to learn things, and to be back in the university environment was just feeding my soul.

And I thought well, what better thing to do as a gift to myself than to continue to take classes, and ultimately was in discussion with Kathy and said, "What can I do? I'd love to do some kind of research and I know I'm not the typical student, but tell me what the possibilities are." And so honestly if you have an interest and you're willing to put in the time and effort, the possibilities are really quite endless I found out.

So I've zeroed in on a rather obscure research topic, and it does involve bison poop, which we have quite a bit of here in the Yellowstone ecosystem. So, my supply is literally endless. And I am working on a very obscure topic, but one that may be of some use, which is to understand how this particular coprophilous fungus operates, so that when we see it in lake cores associated with pollen -- which is what Kathy does mainly is a lot of pollen work -- that we can understand what it means.

And without going into too much detail, it's something that could actually have global significance if we can find out. We have a really interesting unique opportunity here in Yellowstone because bison are associated with this fungus and we know a lot about bison, when they came, where they hang out because of the Park. And so that's something that's sort of the basis of my research is using that unique lifestyle that the bison have here, and making that work for me in interpreting the fungus and where we're finding or where we're not finding it. I don't know if that's of interest, but it's been a lot of fun and I've certainly learned a lot, and it's great using the Yellowstone ecosystem as a laboratory is the best.

GT: How awesome is that.

BU: I was going to say, it's very restricted not just because of Park regulations for research, I mean there's certainly that, but I can only access lake core when there's not a cover of snow and ice, and when bears aren't using the area, and when there's not nesting birds, or when the waters low enough to ford a stream with my equipment. So I have very short windows of time and opportunity for me to get in there and get the materials that I need. But once I get them back to the lab I can work on them all year long, so that's not a problem.

GT: Well that's so great. So Barbara you're work on climate change and your interest in the climate change situation took you to France and Spain recently. You had an opportunity to look back on your life in Yellowstone from across the pond. Can you share some of your reflections about your experience?

BU: Sure. That was just a recent trip, and I was so privileged to be able to work with some researchers from the University of Barcelona in Andorra, which is a tiny little country that's nestled in the Pyrenees between France and Spain. And I always found, I love to travel, I love to learn and I love to travel of course, and I always think traveling is the best way to learn. But it just does so much good to take yourself out of where you're comfortable, and where things are kind of normal and status quo, and see your own life from that perspective.

And so we hiked around the Pyrenees gathering data that part of this ongoing 15-year climate study that they're doing there, and I would say, "This looks a lot like the Colorado Rockies, the landscape does." Or you see the snowmelts, I'm thinking: "Wow there's quite a bit of snow left here, now I wonder if there's this much left in Yellowstone, different elevations and what not."

But one of the things that I really noticed and just really came away with was that in the course of eight days climbing around from dawn until dusk, we saw one chamois and two roe deer. And we saw nothing else, nothing else. Save a legless lizard and snake and few rodents -- some birds, yes. But it was very nice.

I enjoyed seeing them, and also judging by the excitement that the researchers who were from that area had when we saw these deer and the chamois, they were really just ecstatic. And everybody stopped what they were doing followed them along the hillside and what not.

And it made me realize once I got back to Yellowstone, to my home, and on my way to the grocery store I see a herd of elk sitting on the ball field in front of the school, or I drive into the Park and I see bison are in the road. And there's a black bear with a cub, and an eagle just flew over, or an osprey caught a fish behind my house on the river.

And I thought first of all of course Montana is a wonderful place to come home to. Yellowstone and the northern edge of Yellowstone is an amazing place to live, I'm very very fortunate. But it also really brings to light the fact that we have something very very

precious here, very precious. Unusual, unique and it truly is a treasure. And the more that I can translate that in some way to people that I guide, to now my students at MSU -- I forgot to mention that I am very fortunate to be able to do a little teaching up there at the university. I love having contact with the students there. I really feel compelled to try somehow to communicate that to folks.

That what we have here is something that a lot of other people on other parts of the world do not have. That this is something really worth protecting and I know that. I know that myself, but if I only keep that to myself I am not doing the world any kind of service or this ecosystem. So it really really brings home to me -- and this trip in particular, because I was in such a remote place -- and realized that there have been humans living in those areas, those mountains, those ecosystems for so long, they literally have killed everything. They literally have.

They're bringing bears back into the Pyrenees but they have maybe 30 or 40. And they had to import male bears because there were no male bears left. And they're trying to bring them back, but of the challenges that they face is that there are so many people, so many communities, such heavy human use of that landscape that it's really going to be a challenge.

So here, we're not quite that bad. This is where it's really worth focusing our efforts to keep our ecosystem intact, to keep it complete like it is here in the Yellowstone ecosystem. How really important that is, not just for the ecosystem but for all of us to be able to have it and experience it in the future.

GT: Well thank you Barbara, thank you very much this is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Times and we're listening to Barbara Ulrich from Gardiner, Montana. Thank you so much.

BU: You're very welcome. It was great to be with you.