

by Tom Opre

Modern-Day Grizzly Bear Reality



Across the North American West, the burgeoning restoration of an apex predator is bringing conflict with—and among—humans. Biologists and Native Americans propose solutions.

Newspaper accounts of livestock killed and eaten; social media posts from a bloodied hunter describing being attacked; tourists and mountain bikers killed in and around national parks—such events are almost becoming a norm rather than an exception. What do they all have in common? The grizzly bear.

Some people say a way of life valued throughout the western USA and Canada is being threatened by recent legal decisions regarding the status of the grizzly bear. These decisions limit wildlife managers' ability to mitigate a serious problem, one that threatens to explode. An apex predator, the grizzly bear has successfully recovered much of its range. In 1975, when the bear was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the US Fish and Wildlife Service said that a stable population of several hundred grizzlies lived south of the Canadian border in small ecosystems. Today, grizzly bears are expanding into areas they haven't occupied in a century or more. Their population in the Lower 48 states is now estimated to be at least 1,550.

by Tom Opre

With increasing populations and range, grizzlies are foraging closer to human habitation, leading to more, and more serious, conflict while taxpayers assume the costs of relocating or euthanizing “problem” bears. Grizzlies are losing every day. What can we do to ensure that these iconic predators continue to prosper and provide biodiversity?

Cattle vacating a meadow as grizzly bears move in. A still photo from “The Wildlife Conservation Project: Grizzly Bear Chapter I” from Firesteel Films.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmKyw5-Hi40>)

The problem

It’s complicated. No surprise. In this day and age of extreme partisanship, both sides use the grizzly as political fodder. Whether one side wants to expand fossil-fuel extraction or grazing rights, or the other side objects to the actions of farmers, ranchers or the natural-resource industry, the bears are caught in the middle and not being managed in their best interests.

Grizzly bear conservation has been hijacked by politicians and the anti-hunting lobby.

In 2017, British Columbia’s New Democratic Party stirred up its base by promising to ban “trophy hunting” of the species. It was no surprise that such a highly emotional issue polled well with an urban society. Most British Columbians live in and around the megacity of Vancouver. Many no longer have a connection to nature except through the anthropomorphism of animals via Hollywood and the mainstream media. Few, if any, have traditions that include the direct use of wild resources. The province banned grizzly bear hunting in December 2017.

Protectionism—or wise conservation?

“Why were we not asked [about the grizzly bear issue]?” wondered Tahltan Council President Chad Day. “Our people have lived on and managed our lands for 10,000 years. We need to be the people making the decisions. Not people from urban areas. Not people from other parts of the world. We are the people who live with these bears. We need to make these decisions.” Day was speaking to me for a video interview at the World Mountain Ungulate Conference in Bozeman, Montana, in September 2019.

The Tahltan are a First Nations people who have long inhabited northwestern British Columbia. Salmon, moose and berries were staples of their diet, which led to direct competition with grizzly bears. The Tahltan managed this conflict by hunting the bears. The Tahltan have a strong tradition of realizing economic benefits from wildlife. Tribal members were some of the first professional hunting guides in Canada, taking European clients on months-long horseback expeditions to hunt moose, mountain goat, Stone sheep, mountain caribou and grizzly bear.

Day added, “Tahltan people are going to be forced to take matters into their own hands and protect people, our communities, our ungulates and our culture. This grizzly [hunting] closure is by far the stupidest decision which impacts the Tahltan Nation. The grizzly closure is not going to save a single

by Tom Opre

grizzly bear in Tahltan territory.”



A Tahltan hunter scrapes a grizzly bear hide. Author's photo

In years past, a Tahltan outfitter could earn upward of \$15,000 on a single, carefully managed grizzly bear hunt. Most outfitters only had one or two bear permits per season, but their hunters often added other species like moose or caribou, which could push the total price of their hunt over \$25,000. Resource extraction—mining—provides the highest-paying jobs in Tahltan territory, but outfitting has provided a high-quality lifestyle and reasonable pay, which has kept many Tahltan connected to their ancestral land. Is killing bears illegally, outside of this economically incentivized model, going to lessen the human-bear conflict?

Tahltan wildlife guardian Jarret Quock told me, “We’re not here saying all the grizzly bears need to be shot. We’re saying there’s just too many. The end result is going to be the grizzly bear will do the suffering.”

‘Best-managed bears’

The BC ban on grizzly bear hunting didn’t even pass muster with the science community in Canada. Dr.

by Tom Opre

Mark Boyce is a professor of population ecology in the Dept. of Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta, and the Alberta Conservation Association Chair in Fisheries and Wildlife. He told me, “We did a review synthesis, two years ago, for the BC government looking at how the bears were managed and the science that went into decision making.

“The upshot of the review was this was the best-managed grizzly population in the world. They had a team of highly qualified scientists making all these regulatory decisions, making sure there was a limited harvest. In locations where there was opposition by the local First Nations, there was no harvest. Any place where there was declining or inadequate populations, there was no harvest.”

Evidently the bear-hunting ban was a political decision, made with no science to back it up. Although it was intended to “save” grizzly bears, their habitat is under increasing pressure from human development and encroachment.

What is happening in British Columbia is also occurring in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, where lawsuits brought by organizations such as the Center for Biological Diversity promote a no-hunting approach to grizzly bear management. Their goal is to see grizzly bears fill their historic range prior to European colonization of North America. This includes states with huge human populations, including California and the Rocky Mountain Front Range, home to more than 5 million people from Fort Collins to Albuquerque. Politicians from as far away as New Jersey are clamoring to ban the hunting of predators such as grizzly bears.

Today, grizzlies have exceeded the carrying capacity of the available habitat in some recovery zones, including the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in Montana and Wyoming. The bears are now moving into areas where they haven’t been seen since the 1800s. Numerous encounters have led to serious conflict. Both humans and bears are dying. Not only have elk and deer hunters been attacked, but hikers, horseback riders and even mountain bikers also have found themselves on the receiving end of claws and teeth. Whatever the result of these encounters, in the end the grizzly bear almost always loses.

In addition, livestock, fruit trees and other agriculture are drawing the attention of grizzly bears. However, the US federal government, charged with enforcing the Endangered Species Act, has done little, if anything, to educate people living in bear habitat about how to coexist with grizzlies. Also at the WMC Conference, wildlife photographer, conservationist and Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde member Tony Bynum told me, “The Feds dumped a bunch of bears on us, [but] we haven’t had to live with them in over a hundred years. I think the federal government could be held liable.”

Whether anyone or any entity will be held liable for human-bear conflict will be up to the courts, but today, in prime grizzly habitat throughout western Montana, hunters report that ungulate populations are declining. A lack of predator management coupled with a bad winter or two and now CWD, chronic wasting disease, is a recipe for disaster. And if hunters stop buying hunting licenses, government fish and game agencies will be unable to fund wildlife management.

“We will have the total collapse of the ecosystem,” Dr. Valerius Geist added. Geist is a Canadian biologist—a professor emeritus in Environmental Design at the University of Calgary and a specialist in

by Tom Opre

the biology and behavior of North American large mammals. “That’s what you’re working towards right now. The collapse of the ecosystem is created by an oversupply of predators, which outgrow themselves, literally. That’s wolves and grizzly bears. And grizzly bears will do fairly well if and when much of your wildlife disappears because they will have still available the vegetation which wolves cannot eat.”

Solution: management

What seems to stir up the hornets’ nest is any mention of lifting legal protections or consideration of hunting as a management tool for grizzly bears. University of Sherbrooke biologist Dr. Marco Festa-Bianchet said, “Inevitably, [managers] have to take into account what we may refer to a ‘social license.’ For example, there is a lot of opposition to hunting any kind of predator, and that may have to be taken into account. This was the case with the British Columbia grizzly bear hunt. It was essentially driven by an apparent desire by the public not to see large predators being hunted.

“I never see management [proposed] as a way to improve on Nature. [But] I think we can tolerate a sustainable harvest if we use management to limit our impact.”

Dr. Jon Swenson, of Norway’s University of Life Sciences, said, “Hunting in a controlled regime is not threatening the conservation of any of our species. But this polarization [of society] is a problem. We have to manage these species’ populations for all of the public. Some of these species will become overabundant. So are you going to have state employees killing deer in people’s yards? That’s what they do in England. We need balance. We need to work for the best of the wildlife.”

by Tom Opre



A bear-hunting camp in Alaska. Author's photo

Based on sustainable utilization, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has successfully ushered in the repopulation of dozens of wildlife species, some of which were at the brink of extinction. The “coattails effect” of habitat preservation and management for wild game species has benefited numerous non-game species as well, and enhanced biodiversity across the continent. So how would grizzly bear hunting work to protect the species?

‘Freedom of the woods’

Dr. Geist: “The grizzly bear is designed by nature to be very careful about anything approaching. The one thing a grizzly bear cannot be habituated to is being stalked. [So] take advantage of it—have a very *inefficient* grizzly bear [hunting] season. The grizzly bear notices very quickly if people are afraid of it or if people are being bold and too dangerous. If you have inefficient hunting, you will have what I call ‘freedom of the woods.’ This is because the predators are very, very shy of human beings. We never had the slightest problem [during biological field work] in areas where grizzly bears were hunted.”

Grizzly bears can learn to avoid humans. And if bear numbers could be managed to prevent overpopulation and ranging into human conflict zones, would this enhance the grizzly bear’s life?

by Tom Opre

[Grizzly bears] are all programmed to expand beyond the carrying capacity of the place they live,” said former Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist and author Jim Posewitz; “Hunting is probably the most benign of the [management] alternatives. There’s no evidence in modern history where a species of legally hunted game, which has been part of a well-regulated, science-based management plan, has ever gone extinct. The reality that we’ve seen, time and time again, [is that] game populations expand in size and are found in overall great health. Game managers, scientists and biologists have shown scientifically the offtake of 1% to 3% of a population has no effect on the population as a whole. These experts anticipate and factor-in for natural death along with predation and even deaths by vehicles or trains.

“The main issue here is, we need to maintain a group of [hunters] who are going to be out there fighting in favor of protecting habitat, *not* polluting a river, doing something about climate change and realizing we humans depend on ecosystem services,” added Dr. Festa-Bianchet.

Remove the politics

It is unlikely that 50,000 grizzlies will ever again roam the Great Plains. These historic numbers will never be seen unless we tear down fences, stop planting crops, rip up highways and railroads and bulldoze not only small towns but entire cities and their suburbs—basically remove the region from its critical place in the food, energy and raw materials systems, and then depopulate it.

However, our critical need for conservation and biodiversity demand that the grizzly bear—among many other wild species—remain and flourish. In the Lower 48, the continental US, humans must learn how to co-exist with the grizzly bear. Alaska has tens of thousands of grizzlies and a legal, well-regulated, sustainable hunting season. Hunting creates significant revenue for communities in remote locations of Alaska. It also pays for much of the state’s wildlife conservation and management programs. Non-game and endangered species also greatly benefit from the money earned from hunting. Hunting also creates a level of respect between bears and man. In Alaska, a bear with a whiff of human scent usually starts looking for an escape route.

If we want a healthy, biodiverse ecosystem where grizzly bears can safely co-exist with humans, we must take the politics out of wildlife conservation. Just maybe, if we work together, we’ll make our planet a better home for everything on it.

Banner photo: Grizzly bear photographed by Tony Bynum

As a second-generation outdoor communicator, Tom Opre has made educating the public on wildlife conservation and stewardships a priority. As past president of the Professional Outdoor Media Association, he has worked to help other outdoor communicators and industry leaders understand and present a unified message regarding wildlife and habitat conservation. He is the founder and CEO of the Shepherds of Wildlife Society, a non-profit made up of wildlife filmmakers and photographers, with a mission to promote broader public understanding and the critical importance of modern day wildlife conservation and habitat stewardship. Opre has produced and/or directed national film projects for Fortune 500 companies and television. In 2015, after a highly rated seven-year prime-time run on NBC

by Tom Opre

Sports, he wrapped the award-winning "Eye of the Hunter." Currently, he produces The Wildlife Conservation Project, which examines the future of the world's wildlife species and their habitats and is the executive producer of the reality show "Ultimate Huntress," which airs online and on Amazon Video Direct. Opre's YouTube channel has logged more than 26 million views.