

When a Grizzly Kills a Human

When Yellowstone National Park announced its euthanasia of the grizzly responsible for killing Lance Crosby, a flurry of public opinion ensued from two distinct viewpoints – those supporting and those against Yellowstone’s decision. Critics called the decision capricious and pleaded for preservation of the bear and her two cubs of the year through relocation and rehabilitation.

“We are trespassing into their home and they are protecting themselves” says Marc Bekoff, former Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado.

But it’s not that simple.

When a grizzly conflict occurs in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, federal and state-level bear managers act immediately in accordance with the grizzly management plan in their jurisdiction: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, or Yellowstone National Park. Each management plan mimics the overarching 1984 Interagency Grizzly Bear Guidelines established to guide population recovery in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

By agreeing to the Guidelines, agencies “accept [them] as the primary source for management decisions involving grizzly bears and their habitat.” Further, “all serious human injury or death will be investigated by an interagency team” of county, state, and federal experts.

“Every situation is so unique it requires a group discussion of bear experts,” says Brian DeBolt, a Large Carnivore Conflict Coordinator with Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). At minimum, the Yellowstone National Park, or Wyoming, Montana, or Idaho state official coordinates with Chris Servheen, USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator. Servheen ensures agencies comply with the Guidelines and in his words, “give the bear as many chances as possible,” and “balance the needs of the bears and needs of people.”

Conflict bears.

When placed on the Endangered Species List in 1974, there were an estimated 200-250 grizzlies in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Today, there are “three

times as many bears occupying two times the habitat area,” says Servheen. They are arguably on the road to recovery. However, DeBolt reminds that “successful recovery equals a lot of conflict”. With a rebounding grizzly population, we encounter them more frequently and in more intimate settings like our backyards.

For encounters of more than just a passing interest, wildlife managers select from a toolbox of aversion and hazing techniques to address minor conflicts such as seeking human garbage and livestock feed. But aversion and hazing are only potentially effective if the bear is a first-time offender and exhibiting mild curiosity or opportunism. Not all bears get the point. Repeat or more serious offenses like livestock fatalities may require relocation to an area away from similar temptations.

But DeBolt says relocation “has limitations for success” and is greatly restricted by the number of appropriate relocation sites – there are less than ten in Wyoming – and the myriad of factors surrounding the conflict, the bear, and the relocation site. The Guidelines require consideration of age, gender, health, bear’s history, conflict type, season, land uses/human activity, relocation distance, and overall logistics including jurisdictional boundaries and a bear’s tolerance to transport.

Proponents of relocating Blaze after Crosby’s death insist there must be a location away from humans where she could stay out of trouble. “There is no such place where a bear will not run into people,” says Kerry Gunther, Yellowstone National Park bear management biologist. Servheen agrees. “There are very few places to move them within the ecosystem,” and “relocated bears do not stay relocated, they redistribute.” Relocated grizzlies are dropped into a dynamic system and must integrate into an existing grizzly community.

Learned behavior.

When pressed why Blaze was not relocated, Gunther pointed to the sow’s caching, or storing, of the body for later consumption. The experts concur caching is clear evidence she viewed Crosby as food. “Grizzlies exhibit amazing diet flexibility,” says Gunther. “They are highly curious, intelligent, and adaptable.

They quickly learn new foods, especially high energy sources, and what season or situation they are available.”

But Bekoff counters, saying “There is no scientific evidence that bears who kill humans will go on to kill again. Killing Blaze did nothing.”

Although no one is certain Blaze would have begun pursuing humans as food, Gunther is certain she learned humans are easy to kill and demonstrated human consumption to her cubs. Since park policy demands action and relocation to a totally isolated place within the park’s jurisdiction is not possible, Blaze was removed from the population.

Her cubs are also being removed via placement at the Toledo Zoo. Bekoff disagrees with this as well, asking instead for placement in a rehabilitation center to be “retrained” in captivity and eventually released after obtaining necessary survival skills. “Cubs have been successfully rehabilitated and reintroduced,” Bekoff says. “In fact, the main cause of death [for reintroduced cubs] has been intraspecies aggression or humans.”

Another alternative suggested by zoo opponents, including Bekoff, is to simply release them back to the wild in the hopes they can learn on their own and beat the survival odds. But Gunther assures transport to a zoo is the most humane action. “I don’t know of any captive-reared and successfully reintroduced bears captured that young” he says. As for releasing to the wild, Gunther explained only “55% of cubs of the year survive the first year, and another 50% of those die in their second.” Meager statistics for even well-nurtured cubs.

Gunther likens cub education to college semesters. “265 different food species comprise an average grizzly’s diet, taught over seven semesters” says Gunther. A cub follows their mother two full spring through fall seasons plus at least a portion of their third spring. Blaze’s cubs received only two semesters when Crosby was killed.

Negative perception.

For the sake of argument, let’s say either Blaze was spared and relocated with her cubs, or she was euthanized but her cubs released. Knowing a bear responsible

for a human fatality and consumption, or the cubs she educated, were released back into the ecosystem, would make all of us nervous. Visitors and residents within the Yellowstone ecosystem would question their safety.

DeBolt summarized it by saying “If folks feel agencies are not going to be responsive to real potential dangers of large carnivores, they are going to be fearful, drive animosity against agencies and bears, then promote illegal killing of bears.” This potential fearfulness reminds of a bygone era in which grizzlies were preemptively hunted at will not for crimes committed, but crimes of which they are capable. This hunting resulted in dramatic population decline and an endangered species designation.

“People have to feel we are taking their safety and concerns into account, and taking the bears needs into account” says Servheen. Negative press generated by a bear killing a human is not good for the population as a whole. Leaving a killer bear go free means “everyone would be on edge” says Gunther “and people would be more likely to shoot.”

While Bekoff agrees public perception is an issue, he pleads for a paradigm shift of how we view large carnivores and us as their potential prey. “People need to take more responsibility for going into the wild,” he says. “These animals are not here for us; there are attendant risks.”

Bekoff feels that the public takes advantage of a grizzly management safety net. If grizzlies involved in major conflicts are removed from the population, people generally feel protected that killers aren’t roaming the wild. “If anything happened to me, I wouldn’t want the animal killed,” he says. He feels the animals are simply playing their role in the ecosystem.

Education.

Let’s remember though, actual attacks on humans are minimal. In fact, your odds of being struck by lightning, gored by a buffalo, or attacked by a pet dog are all significantly higher. DeBolt stresses that most encounters “result in mutual departure of person and bear.” This includes Yellowstone National Park where there are only half a dozen conflicts with grizzlies each year even though 3.5 to 4.0 million people visit in the same amount of time.

“Hundreds of encounters turn out okay because people react appropriately” says DeBolt. Decades of education and bear advocacy by the WYGFD have saved both bear and human lives. In one encounter, a hunter was attacked and bitten by a sow defending her cub. His hunting partner immediately sprayed the bear resulting in her hasty retreat. Later in the hospital, the injured hunter thanked DeBolt and WYGFD for their education efforts saying “you know, all the information you put out saved my life.”

Grizzlies demand respect. Yellowstone National Park provides bear safety literature to every visitor, recommends hiking in groups of three or more, and offer bear spray rentals through concessioners. Some critics who so vehemently oppose how Blaze and her cubs were handled also targeted Crosby’s competency saying he was hiking alone, off trail, and without bear spray.

Because Crosby was alone on his last day, there are no witnesses to detail the exact circumstances of his death. But all evidence indicates a simple convergence of very unfortunate events. This is one area Gunther and Bekoff agree.

“He wasn’t doing anything unusual and isn’t a minority”, says Gunther about Crosby. “There are no rules. Just recommendations.” Most visitors hike only in pairs and do not carry bear spray. The bottom line for me is that preemptive education is key as more and more people enter the wild,” says Bekoff.