



NEWS FROM AFIELD A CONNECTION WITH BEARS

Every season I strike out into the Montana mountains to open my senses to bears. To me it is the finest hunt, because bears have a more relatable way of life and intelligence than most animals. In my lifetime I've watched them climb high hills alone with obvious intent and direction. I've seen mothers guide and shelter their cubs. Once, in Alaska, I watched a bear climb a sheer mountain to stand on its very edge, look into the setting sun, and roar. If our intention in hunting is to understand and live in the world in the way of our animal counterparts, then immersing ourselves in the lives of bears in order to find them, know them, is one of the most educating experiences.

I had come to know this bear's home well, after three days. A black bear with a chevron pattern on his chest—my brother had spotted him up in Montana's Bridger Range a week before. And I went, with rifle and pack, to meet him on my own with the intention to hunt him. I had been camping and observing the whole creek system in the foothills, imagining what paths he would take in the mornings, in the evenings. I wondered what he sensed, what appealed to him, and what was he looking for. Rotten stumps to dig? Sunny clearings to warm in? Thoughts of human society slipped away as I worked to envision his view of the hills we shared. It felt expansionary, wonderful.

Finally, one afternoon, I glimpsed his movement. He was walking fast toward the forking ravines of the creek. I dropped my pack and rushed for half a mile to the spot where he'd disappeared. There I was faced with a choice—a high path, a creek bed, and a winding game trail. Something within tugged me to the trail that traversed the hill, and when I rounded its first bend, we were face to face. He was sitting in the sun, quiet and with the yellow chevron shining, only fifty meters away. I raised my rifle and landed my cross hairs on his chest. I looked at him. I took my finger off the trigger. He looked a bit longer, turned, and barreled away.

Bears have taught me lessons that have a greater value to me than their hides or meat. Game-watching, hiking, and photography does not bring me into their domain or open

my appreciation in the way that hunting does. I am thankful for the opportunity to hunt black bears for weeks each year in Montana's epic national forests and public lands. It allows me to explore our world the way they experience it. Americans have this opportunity to cultivate intense personal relationships with this species. An almost universal

side effect of that is a desire to give back on a greater-than-individual scale.

This is what brought me into alignment with Bear Trust International. Bear Trust is a Bozeman-based charity that raises money for conservation projects on five continents—for polar bears and sun bears alike, for all eight species. Ours is not a hunting advocacy group. But in bear habitats where data supports the possibility of hosting a hunt, we support the chance this gives to humans to connect with bears in their own, ethical way. Its scientific and economic value as a conservation tool



BEAR TRUST INTERNATIONAL

Hunting helps humans to develop an understanding, reverence, and love for animals, including bears.

is one part of the picture, but hunting aligns in another way with Bear Trust's fundamental priority: education.

Bear Trust's own, direct conservation effort (beyond our twenty years of international project funding) has been a series of STEM lesson plans, distributed free of charge to public schools across America. Our Student Scientist series educates children from kindergarten to twelfth grade on habitat recovery, wildlife management, and conservation theory, allowing them to work with accurate and up-to-date simulations of bear, sheep, elk, and other population dynamics. We encourage students to deepen their understanding of human-animal coexistence and appreciate environmental sustainability. We equip them with a knowledge of conservation that is otherwise out of reach for many. Above all, we encourage a future generation to be inquisitive and in awe of nature.

Hunting is what gave me this same, ever-deepening curiosity. It engenders respect, and often a feeling of responsibility. Any activity that cultivates a healthy relationship with the nonhuman world without detracting from an ecosystem's well-being is worth supporting.

Right now, the future of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bear population is the subject of a bitter and divisive debate. The population has recovered brilliantly under the federal protections of the Endangered Species Act and is ready to be transitioned, per the Act, to state management programs.

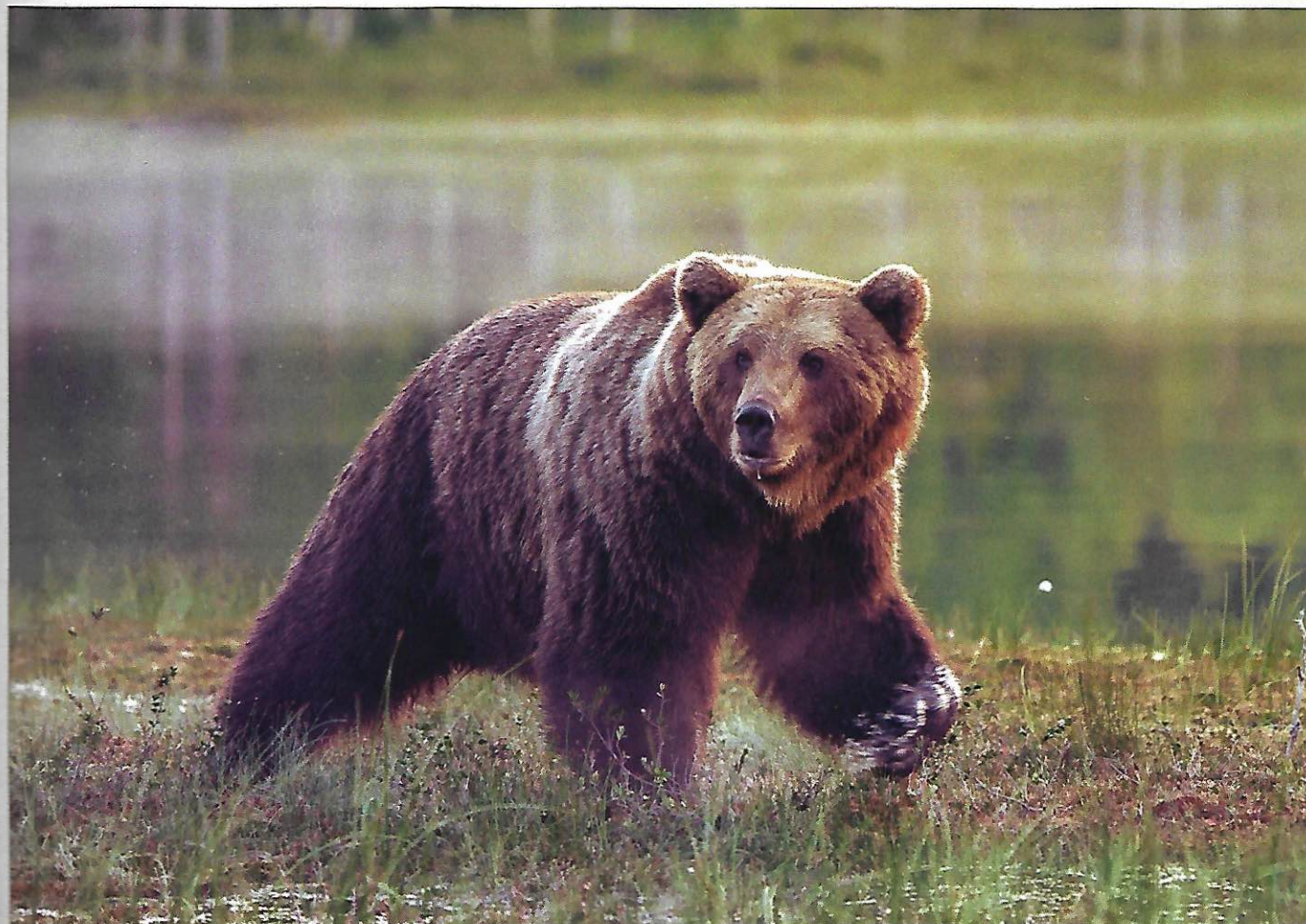
Many Americans are revolted by the idea of predator hunting, and this has completely arrested the delisting transition process. In extensive research (and participation) on the debate, I've found that many of the opinions espoused are reactive to those of other humans. Some people do not want other people to hunt; hunters do not want to be denied their opportunity. The discourse quickly strays from what is most valuable to bears. Objective, scientific scrutiny should determine to what extent the GYE population can be benefitted by a regulated hunt. But in regard to the subjective side of the debate, I would argue that hunting serves a similar role as wildlife education.

At the individual level, hunting develops an understanding, reverence, and even love for animals. This inspires a deeper respect. When practiced ethically, it connects our

society to the reality of other beings in the most intense way—hunters recognize the life-and-death plane of animal existence. As predators ourselves, we come to appreciate the existence of bears through this practice where lives are, naturally, at stake. In this way, we do not separate ourselves from nature, but discover ourselves entwined within it.

There is a popular misconception that we are inspired by the human impulse to consume. I believe that we are driven to the wilderness by a desire to connect. Bear Trust's priority lies in teaching a future generation how to connect and give back. We do not believe that "preserving" wildlife by removing humanity from ecological relationships will lead to a better future. Rather, we believe in teaching coexistence. It is our hope that humans will always be able to seek natural connection and self-discovery in the wilds, by any means that help conserve the environment and bring us closer in touch with it. To join us in our encouragement of sustainable public hunting, visit www.beartrust.org.

—*Jackson Evans, Director of Publications and Editor, Bear Trust International*



Opposition to bear hunting has derailed wildlife managers' abilities to manage populations in the best interest of the bears themselves.