

Bear Trust International presents

The New Value of the Grizzly

Conversations on a Coexistent Future

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The future of grizzly bears is a bitterly divisive topic, and rightly so.

In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, some 35,000 square miles spanning Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, bears have recovered from a crisis level of roughly 136 reached in the 1970s, to a healthy population of over 700. The federal protections of the Endangered Species Act have worked. The scientific community is divided though: some believe the grizzly is ready to be “delisted” — managed once again by states — and others believe more work needs to be done. Yet the heated question remains: Should the grizzly bear be delisted in the lower 48, and if so, should states allow them to be hunted?

Last year, Wyoming proposed a 23-tag public hunt, and the ensuing litigation from anti-hunt interest groups has arrested the entire delisting process. No court has ruled on the legitimacy of grizzly hunting

directly, though. The public debate on it seems more intense, intractable and vitriolic than ever — but it does raise essential questions.

Can predator hunting be accepted by an evolving American society? And whose human opinion should reign over the management of wildernesses?

Is killing an animal without the intention of eating it morally sound? What is the vision of human-animal coexistence that we should strive for? What are the emotions driving each side of the hunting debate?

Our decisions about grizzlies bring us to a justified moment of socio-cultural reckoning. To dive underneath the fierce rhetoric of the debate, I sat down with four passionate conservationists to talk deeply about the real subjects of the issue — bears.



Jack Evans

Writing has led Jack Evans to years of outfitting in Tanzania and Zambia, conservation efforts in the American West, and academic studies in human-animal anthropology in Scotland and South Africa. He is also the Editor and Director of Publications at Bear Trust International.

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Derek Craighead

People ask me, “Why do you do what you do?” and it’s really pretty simple. I want to be a voice for the non-human part of our world.

Derek has shared his life with the wild world. He was raised near Yellowstone, born into one of the most influential families in modern American conservation. He is a scientist and writer, motivated by inquisitiveness and sheer passion to solve human conflicts with nature from Alaska to Central Asia. He lives in Kelly, Wyoming, facing the white fronts of the Tetons. We met on a bright winter morning as he was finishing up a paper on raptor migrations for the nonprofit research institute he founded and chairs, Craighead Beringia South.

The delisting issue should really be a discussion of human nature and who we are. As a species, we don’t like to be very introspective of ourselves or very honest about what we do, about where our moralities lie. In general, we’re very homocentric, and the moral rudder that we use to guide ourselves is totally separate from the one we use for other life on Earth. Our discussions about interacting with the natural world are very often around minutiae, should we allow this or that, but we rarely take a step back and look at the big picture.

I’m not anti-hunting; I grew up hunting. But at some point along the way, something changed in me. It’s relatively easy to kill something, especially with a gun. But to keep a black bear alive, from the day he’s born to the day he dies, to ensure that the one black bear is able to survive without lethal threats and live a good life — that’s a lot of work! And to do that for a whole population of black bears? To do it for all the bears in the world? Who in the human world is that committed? It’s really difficult to take on that responsibility for wildlife, and most people don’t want to do that amount of work.

And I’m not saying that killing is necessarily evil or wrong — we’re part of a natural system where species’ killing and eating of each other is all part of the ebb and flow of things. I would never say that all hunting should be stopped, or all killing. That’s part of life on Earth. But to me, doing what it takes to survive and taking on responsibility in a really moral way are very different, very distinct paths. And it is more difficult to relate to something compassionately than consumptively.

One of the teachings of Buddhism is that you have to have compassion for everything — not just for your fellow man, but compassion for all life. And part of compassion is a real deep and profound understanding of equality between beings — whether they’re other humans or Bengal tigers or piranhas. But a compassionate coexistence is kind of a threat to our ego. If our species primacy becomes threatened, we’re quick to react harshly. We lose all logic and reach for that first wildlife management tool: kill! If you’re compassionate, you have to be willing to step back — you can’t just be a controller. You have to be accepting, and allow and assist *life*.

I was very involved in a conservation effort in Mongolia to try to save a highly endangered bear, the Gobi grizzly. I found the Mongolians’ Buddhist culture to be very thoughtful and accepting of their position in life. They see themselves more

as...just another creature on Earth. In the first years we did the study, we only found maybe 30 Gobi bears left in the world, and none in zoos, just a small wild population. They’d declined mainly because of changes to the ecosystem, like drought. But I had confidence that the Mongolians would be relatively more successful in perpetuating that species than we would be here in North America saving the grizzly bear. They see life differently there. And the Gobi bears are doing better than they were 10 years ago.

Conservation here is often a debate, or adversarial, because people are arguing the special interests they have — in some way, what’s going to profit them. It’s surprising how rarely conservation discussions are based around what’s best for the wilderness or for a particular species. And a lot of “advocates” are not talking about bears, what bears need. They’re not speaking for the bears. Whether it’s the hunters or the politicians or the park service — they’re often speaking about their special interest.

The question about grizzly bears is: Are we as a culture willing to make the sacrifice to set aside large land areas and say, the priority here is not just ourselves, not even just bears, but as close as we can have to a naturally interacting ecosystem? Well...yeah, we could do that next with grizzly bears.



A. C. “Charles” Smid

As I matured as a hunter, I began to develop that spiritual connection with nature. What finally “clicked” for me was a desire for this to be enjoyed by future generations to come.

Charles is the founder and chair of the Bozeman-based nonprofit Bear Trust International. Though he’s been deeply involved in philanthropic conservation initiatives for decades now, Charles’ conservation interests are ever-evolving. He created Bear Trust in 1999 in an effort to encourage positive human-bear coexistence, pioneering youth education and mentorship programs.

Hunting has a unique education value for individuals. Was I a conservationist when I first started to hunt? No, I don’t think most people were! I was a gatherer. I was just out of college and I had a wife and three kids, so I needed to gather food. But I also had a deep appreciation for wildlife as a Fair Chase hunter. I think after you’ve been in the field and you start to understand the spiritual connection with the animals — whether you are successful or not — you understand the beauty of Mother Nature and you feel the ongoing relationship that you’re developing at a soulful level.

Since I started occasionally archery hunting for bears, when I was around 20 years old, I’ve had a lot of encounters with them. But I’ve never harvested a bear. There were opportunities, but I’ve never seen their worth as a trophy, and every time it just didn’t feel right. That’s a final choice you make when you’re hunting — whether to pull the trigger or not. In the moment, you can feel an intuition, whether it’s right or wrong. And you learn that if it doesn’t feel right, you don’t do it.

It’s difficult to explain the decisions that come out of a spiritual connection with nature — you’ve got to go out and experience it to understand. Then it leads to an ‘aha!’ moment, about realizing your part in a bigger ecosystem. “Now I get it.” And you grow up over time, deepening that relationship and appreciation. Eventually you realize: “I want to be able to give back.” What starts as hunting for the pot or maybe just the interest in it slowly becomes part of a greater appreciation. There’s a maturation process.

As I got older, I began joining groups like the Wild Sheep Foundation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, really just to help them out. I was introduced as a regular member of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1991. And on one morning that Spring, I was out visiting the Club’s Teddy Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in Montana. I was on a hike, looking for black bears, glassing the mountainside covered in snow. It was a bitterly cold morning. Way off in the distance I saw a string of horses, and a few people dressed in white and blaze orange. They were grizzly hunters. And they were the last ones. Montana was closing its hunting season, to align with the federal protections on the grizzly bear.

I was seeing this whole thing go before my eyes. And I’m thinking: “Something’s wrong with this. How can we as people not figure out a way to balance the needs of wildlife with the needs of humans — the need for proper habitat and sustainability for bears?”

I formed Bear Trust International after realizing that this was what was lacking, and this was what I wanted to be able to do. It became clear that there was no other viable fundraising for bears at that time. And it’s been a hell of a lot of work, but we put it together, and now we’re growing faster than ever!

What’s so important to me with Bear Trust is that we’re able to do our free conservation education lesson plans for kids — the future leaders of our world. And a really important detail about the lessons is that they don’t provide kids with single answers. Instead, the students work in teams to determine the viability of a management strategy on their own. Just like policymakers are doing with the grizzly bear delisting, they work together to make their decision based on factual scientific data, not on the human emotion that a lot of these decisions are based on. It’s meant to be a simulation of cooperation, which we could use a lot more of in the real world. The most important thing about this is a byproduct effect that we are mentoring our future leaders to understand the value of conservation through education.

Hunting is education too. There’s so much gained through the knowledge of the wild— whether it’s learned through a mentor or on your own when you’re in the field. You also learn from the social connections and inspirations of other hunters. For the individual, hunting plays a part in understanding the spiritual connection with the outside world. Hopefully that has a positive effect, like when I realized that I needed to be able to pay back my appreciation, and therefore I needed to get involved. I want to make a difference, doing work with bears, because we do need connection in order to coexist with wildlife. We’re all seeking coexistence with bears, and hunting, when it’s scientifically proven to be sustainable (perhaps in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem), is an important part of that.



John Turner

“With hunting under fire, I worry about American culture drifting away from an appreciation of the wilderness. Personally, I’m glad to live and work in wild country, where you can still be eaten.”

John is a fifth-generation Wyoming rancher, but likely the first to head the Fish and Wildlife Department. As Director, from 1989 to 1993, he oversaw a boom in the creation of public Wildlife Refuges as well as the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone. His passion for ecology has driven his leadership of the widely influential Conservation Fund as well, and still keeps him close to the wilderness, guiding raft trips and exploring the Tetons well into his seventies. We spoke in his Moose, Wyoming home about compromise, collaboration and culture.

I’ve always been interested in grizzlies, and I’ve dealt with them all my life. I grew up around my family’s hunting outfit, and we hunted grizzlies. I think when they finally listed them, though, we all said: “It’s time.” The numbers in Yellowstone were declining. The habitat was in good shape, the prey base was in good shape, but the mortality on them was just too high.

I think one of the causes in the long term might have been that old Western sense from the homesteading days, the early cattleman

days, that big predators should be greatly curtailed if not eliminated—defending the interests of wool-growers and stock-growers and the protection of herds.

When I was the Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the grizzly issue was certainly simmering. I said that we really needed to be looking at the delisting, just to discuss it, because I’m a strong believer in management by the states. I commissioned people to begin reviewing it.

And now the grizzly is back. We have more grizzlies now than at any point in my lifetime. In our business, our wilderness operation, we encounter bears every day. They’ve fully occupied this ecosystem. And I think we have far more grizzlies than the biologists are listing, although they’re very fair about it, saying it’s a very conservative number. I think this is a credit to everybody — to the scientists, the government agents, the outfitters, the public — for having brought the grizzly back. We ought to celebrate that.

Now obviously, I have a bias toward hunting because I grew up as a guide, and my family has been in the hunting business for the past 85 years. Those people I’ve hosted over the years love the challenge, the adventure, being in the wilderness, and making contributions back to it because they love wildlife. I love to hunt too, but I like taking people hunting even more and help them appreciate the flora, fauna, and nuances and seasonality of it. We’re sitting in the middle of one of the intact ecological treasures of this planet! It’s sharing that with other people that I’ve always enjoyed.

A lot of folks with anti-hunting sentiment have no idea what that’s all about. It would be tragic if we someday didn’t have hunting — it’s historical and traditional, and the hunting community has been one of the strongest advocates of conservation, sound management and good science. Plus it’s important to the economy of the region.

Because of the whittling down of some of these big-game herds, because there are fewer people knowledgeable enough to host others in the backcountry, and because of demographic changes, we’re seeing the slow decline of the hunting community across the country. I worry that the American lifestyle is starting to drift away from the outdoors.

As an old politician, I also worry about our democracy because people don’t read newspapers anymore, and we’ve got a lot of complicated social issues that you have to get educated on! Now, the arguments made opposing delisting are simply ignoring the biological facts that we know of. To not start hunting grizzlies just ignores the science, ignores good management. I’m a big defender of the Endangered Species Act, and opposing delisting is really undermining one of our greatest management tools.

A lot of people don’t understand this issue and want hunting ended for extreme reasons. But I’ve never been too comfortable with the bombastic approach — attacking people, litigating against them — we see too much of that in the environmental community. That’s not progressive conservation.

I think “conservation” is a more balanced approach where you believe in management, you believe in the science, you believe in utilization — hunting, fishing — and recognize its value. Conservationists are more accommodating of people’s views. How do we help ranchers stay in the ranching business? How do we help loggers go to the woods to make a living and still protect habitat? I’ve always found that the best approach is to sit down with people and find out what our mutual interests are. What values do we share? I’ve spent my whole life working on this. It’s heavy lifting, dealing collaboratively with people. It’s a lot easier just to blast them, carry a poster and condemn them. That might be a good fundraising tactic for radical groups, but it doesn’t lead us to good wildlife decisions.





Chris Servheen

“We’re entering a different era of conservation, where people are beginning to see an existence value to wild animals — something more careful and meaningful about keeping them alive than consuming them.”

For 35 years, Chris led human efforts to recover grizzly bear populations in the Continental US. As a PhD student, he co-authored the original Recovery Plan and would act as Coordinator of the inter-agency process until 2016. He helped bring together state, federal and international agendas for the incredibly successful revival of wild grizzlies. He wrote the Recovery Criteria that started this delisting process, and is respected as one of the most experienced bear biologists in the world.

Grizzly bears were really tough to recover, because they reproduce so slowly. They’re in conflict with people. They’re dangerous — and yet we brought them back from the abyss, over 40 years, to healthy populations in the lower 48 states. That’s the success of the Endangered Species Act. And the objective of the Act is to get grizzly bears delisted and to turn their management over to the states.

Delisting doesn’t mean you take away the protections; it means you institutionalize what got bears recovered in the first place — the careful management of mortality, management of conflicts, sanitation to keep garbage and food away from bears, road closures — all so that you have a secure habitat out there. All these things were put in place through a Conservation Strategy, so that when the Endangered Species Act gets pulled out from underneath, the Strategy takes over and the population and its habitats remain safe.

But all this litigation against the delisting revolves around hunting. That’s what froze the whole process.

Hunters are embraced, by and large, in the West, because “we who hunt, hunt animals to eat them.” We put them in the freezer to feed our families. But when you hunt something that you don’t put in the freezer, and you’re not going to eat it — particularly something that’s really iconic — there’s a big question mark there.

Now hunting is not something that’s going to eliminate grizzly bears or threaten the population in any way, because there are so few that are going to be taken. But those few are going to be so symbolic that it’s going to cause a lot of division among people.

From a money-making point of view, the State of Wyoming is not going to make anything close to the amount of money they need to manage grizzly bears from selling licenses. Do we need hunting to reduce bear numbers? No — The Conservation Strategy has strict mortality limits that hunting won’t impact. Some people are told, erroneously, that human-bear conflicts will be reduced if you hunt. There’s no scientific basis for that, whatsoever. In fact, there have been studies done on black bears where they’re hunted extensively, back east, and there’s no relationship between human-bear conflicts and the hunter take the previous year.

It’s not going to benefit management. It’s not going to reduce conflicts. It’s not going to reduce human injury. It’s not going to make much money. Where is the benefit here? It’s hard to find any, scientifically. It seems to be some people saying: “We are the Fish and Game Department, and therefore, we hunt things. We always did, and if we’re going to manage grizzly bears, we’re going to hunt them.”

Saying that (when we haven’t hunted grizzly bears in over 40 years) is kind of leading with the chin — the agencies are just saying “hit us right here.” Conservation groups have got all kinds of support to oppose delisting because of the hunting issue.

Now, you can go to Yellowstone in the summer and there are literally hundreds of people trying to get a look at grizzly bears. There are people from Nevada and Florida and Vermont that drove across the country just to feel among them, just to have a chance to see them. There’s an existence value to those bears — not a consumptive value. Existence value is having wild lands and animals like grizzly bears and bald eagles alive, things that you don’t even have to see or reduce to your possession.

The grizzly bears in the Yellowstone ecosystem, the 700 of them — every one is hugely valuable to the three to four million visitors that go to Yellowstone every year.

In this whole debate, tolerance is important in every way: being tolerant of bears, tolerant of other people’s views, tolerant of the fact that somebody may disagree with you but that doesn’t make them a bad person.

For example, the Bear Clan, in the Blackfeet Reservation — they won’t even look at a bear hide. It’s a violation of their clan’s totem to kill an animal and put their hide on the wall. They used to have a hide in the tribal council building, and no one from the clan would come to the meetings! They had to take it down. That doesn’t mean that everybody on

the Reservation thinks that, but those people of the Bear Clan are so sensitive about it. It’s important to recognize. As you know if you’ve read up on the opposition to the delisting in Yellowstone, the tribes there were united in the idea that bears shouldn’t be hunted. They opposed delisting because of hunting. That was it.

So it’s a clash of values. You’ve got people who say: “We live in Wyoming, we hunt everything.” I question that idea that conservation needs to be a consumptive thing, or that we only want to have things we can kill, harvest. There is value in the existence of some animals beyond consumption. I think we’re in a time of transition of social values and the way people see animals.

And if there’s ten people who get to hunt grizzly bears, is that going to help save them? I don’t think we need to do that. I think we need to be bigger than that with some animals.

In Closing

As Derek highlights, every practical management decision is a chance to reflect on who we are as a species, and how we treat nonhuman life. If we acknowledge our capacity to both build and destroy our own connections with nature, then we should consider what kind of coexistence will engender greater respect and understanding of the ecosystems that we share. If we choose to see naturally interacting ecosystems as an ideal, what will it take to change centuries of human consumption habit? It may be harder, as a culture, to embark upon a path of preserving life and fight any urge to take from the order and flow of nature — but in an age of intense human encroachment on our ecosystems, perhaps the lessons we need to learn lie down this road. In deciding which path we want to follow as managers and impactors of the wild world, will we prove able to dream beyond our perceived priority over other forms of life?

Charles tells us how the moment of intense confrontation with another species, coming after an arduous and humbly undertaken hunt, can actually be a generative moment of relating. That immersion into the lifeworld of another being and the embrace of an undeniably violent aspect of nature — hunting — can actually bring us into closer-felt communion with the nonhuman world. We are so similar to bears when we hunt them; we are powerful, intelligent, solitary, predatory animals of our own, and by practicing their way in the woods we’re often led to a sense of appreciation larger than ourselves. We’re often inspired to give back. If we could no longer access this hunting relationship with wild animals, how else would we deeply and spiritually understand them?

John explains how conservation on the grandest scale should be a form of resource management accommodating all morally and scientifically sound practices. No single social agenda should dominate the way we conserve our world, and in the same way, no single voice should push to exclude or decry others. If our intention is to strive for a balanced human-bear interaction that still allows cultures and traditions to flourish, then we can only learn more by listening to a multitude of ideas and experiences. But who should decide and set the course for management practice in a specific region like the Greater Yellowstone? Or is this an issue that should concern humanity as a moral whole?

Chris draws attention to the symbolic appreciation that so many people hold for bears and the effects this has on our social consciousness. As important as hunting will be for those who undertake the chase, it will still upset those who hold bears’ undisturbed lives as innately sacred. A question lies between these opposing perspectives. What other ways are there to deeply value animal life? As our society takes steps forward into new eras of ecological relationship, we must ask ourselves: Can connection and appreciation be fostered through a love for the existence of wildlife, even if we don’t own it, touch it — kill it?

Perhaps this is the most essential question of the delisting debate: How will we value other species? There are many ways to encounter and learn from wildness. All forms of conservation are inspired by the educating exchange that connection to nature brings us. How can we best learn from animals and protect generative relationships throughout our multispecies ecosystems? Is grizzly hunting necessary to know the animal? Are some cultural traditions so meaningful that we should preserve them? Does an ideal future for environments like the Greater Yellowstone include the human right to hunt? The delisting debate may center on grizzlies, but to truly honor its complexity and consequences, we should perhaps turn more attention onto ourselves.



To bring your ideas to the conversation, email the author at jack@beartrust.org or visit www.beartrust.org to learn more about Bear Trust International’s global efforts to conserve bear populations.