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Response to “Grizzly bear restoration and economic restructuring in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem”

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I read Jerry Johnson’s paper “Grizzly bear restoration and economic restructuring in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem” with great interest. It compellingly illustrates, in spite of naysaying from others, that grizzly recovery has walked hand in hand with rural community economic success. There are those who have denounced the Endangered Species Act (ESA) over regulatory measures they allege impede prosperity, but as Johnson points out, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) has seen economic health over the last decades while grizzly bear numbers have increased. The ESA may gall those focused on extraction, but it certainly does not diminish job opportunities. As extractive industries have declined, economies have diversified, and the population of residents has increased. New residents are often attracted to the “natural amenities”—western public lands including grizzly habitat. As we see more people come to the West as tourists and immigrants, bears face additional pressures that could impact populations. How Americans, and those of us living in the GYE, value biodiversity and robust grizzly populations will matter in future management of this species.

Reading Johnson’s paper as an environmental historian, I thought about how the GYE has changed and how the bear has been both devalued and valued along with cultural shifts and priorities. What we today conceive of as the GYE, so defined by its ecological characteristics, is a landscape that over the centuries has been shaped by colonization, resource extraction, and shifts both in regional demographics and in the American ethos. In turn, these shifts have impacted grizzly populations. For nearly 150 years, bear populations have fluctuated depending on how they were construed—from a detriment to livestock production, to a form of entertainment, to a threatened and important apex species. With the delisting effort, there are also those who imagine the bear as a taxidermized trophy.

As the grizzly has been alternatively valued or devalued, how has its population fared? As Johnson mentions, the grizzly population of western North America was somewhere around 50,000 when their range was inhabited solely by Indigenous nations. With white settlement, populations plummeted as the bears were displaced from 98% of their former habitat and killed by those who saw them as nuisances. Grizzly bears were virtually wiped out in the lower 48 states except for populations in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and a sliver of Washington. With the 1872 designation of Yellowstone National Park, a sort of grizzly safe haven was created, though the park was established for the pleasure of humans, not for the protection of grizzlies. Bears were not a priority and park boundaries took into account no considerations of sustainable habitat or migratory corridors—these principles were not understood at the time. Forested lands outside the park were not regarded as important grizzly habitat, but rather as reserves for timber and rangeland for livestock producers. The land inside park boundaries was managed for leisure—the bears, like the geysers, became valued for what they could provide for human experience, an amusing diversion.

Both grizzly and black bears were props in a Yellowstone tourist encounter and became a must-see spectacle. Some were hand-fed, and others foraged at dumps where seating was arranged so the public could watch the bears feed and fight.¹ Even Horace Albright, superintendent of Yellowstone National Park from 1919–1929, encouraged visitors to engage with bears. The following passage is from Utah Senator Reed Smoot’s journal:

Thursday July 14, 1927. Supt Albright took us to breakfast and showed us the principal Geysers and wonders of Old Faithful and others. We took lunch at

the Old Faithful Inn and then we started for Moran and Jackson and Jenny Lakes.... We met a number of bears on the way and took time to feed them....²

Albright soon back-peddled on his bear feeding folly after several attacks on humans and many incidents of marauding bears damaging property.³ Habituated bruins were dangerous. In 1942, the last feeding area with stands for bear watchers closed at Otter Creek, though the last open dump wasn't closed until 1970.⁴

Even after the creation of the park, grizzly bear numbers were dangerously low for their continued survival in the lower 48. It would be nearly a hundred years before a growing public concern around imperiled American wildlife would bring about the ESA in 1966. Grizzlies were listed as “threatened” in 1975, when, as Johnson points out, the Yellowstone population consisted of an estimated 136–312 grizzly bears. This was a population that biologists such as John Craighead, Lee Metzgar, and Dave Mattson, described as representing one piece—the park itself—of a mosaic of public and private lands necessary to sustain a healthy grizzly population in the Yellowstone ecosystem, as well as to function as one part of a dynamic metapopulation across the Northern Rockies. In their research, Craighead and colleagues suggested that three other grizzly habitats—the Cabinet–Yaak area and the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem in Montana, and what is now regarded as the “Bitterroot Recovery Zone,” the Selway–Bitterroot Wilderness and the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho—be connected to the GYE, by way of biological corridors, for genetic purposes and restored range.⁵

At the time of its passage most Americans supported the ESA, its regulations for recovering wildlife, and its requisite restrictions to extraction practices, but there were some who did not. An ongoing western movement arose, manifested at first in some of the ideas of the Sagebrush Rebellion, later morphing into the “Wise Use” movement in the 1990s. Wise-users have championed the idea that endangered species thwart job opportunities, a premise that Johnson disproves. This movement alleges that species protection meant the loss of economic opportunities in rural communities due to heavy regulations. Extractive jobs in the West have indeed shrunk since the 1960s, though for many reasons beyond endangered species protection, while broader sectors in the counties of the GYE have grown, primarily through the creation of more jobs in health care, real estate, and professional and technical services.⁶

The GYE has changed enormously and become ever popular with long-distance visitors, as well as showing increases in its resident human population. Johnson points out that “recreation [and] overcrowding potentially compromise the qualitative amenities that attract increasing numbers of in-migrants to the region.”⁷ These potential compromises, of course, involve grizzly habitat. Although increasing numbers of people look good on community tax rolls and employment measures, there are many who worry that delisting grizzly bears at a time when there is increasing pressure to open up more recreational opportunities in wilderness areas (e.g., mountain biking), along with the effects of climate change and its impact on grizzly foods, might diminish grizzly populations. Conservation groups and tribes have fought to keep the bear protected since the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) delisted the species in 2017. This decision was overturned in 2018 by a federal district court. That ruling was appealed by the Trump administration and the state of Wyoming. On July 8, 2020, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the original decision against delisting, and noted that “because there are no concrete, enforceable mechanisms in place to ensure long-term genetic health of the Yellowstone grizzly, the district court correctly concluded that the 2017 Rule is arbitrary and capricious in that regard. Remand to the FWS is necessary for the inclusion of adequate measures to ensure long term protection.”⁸ Right now the population numbers look good, but the courts have determined that delisting is premature.

The future of the grizzly bear will be settled by how the species is valued by the government, by the American people, and by the growing number of residents of the GYE. Right now, it's neither a prop nor a trophy, but a viable, though still vulnerable, apex species in the mutable Greater Yellowstone region of the United States. The communities of the GYE have seen economic prosperity, alongside a healthy grizzly bear population. May both these trends abide.

Endnotes

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