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Why grizzlies should stay 'endangered'

In my 45 years living in Jackson Hole I have witnessed several wildlife success stories. One of the most gratifying is that of the region's grizzly bear population, which has rebounded from a low of around 200 to 700-plus today.

There were few grizzly sightings in those early years, and when they occurred they made news. Today perhaps as many as 60 bears use Grand Teton National Park during any given year. This is a conservation success story.

But we must recognize that this dramatic increase occurred while the population was under the full protection of the Endangered Species Act with the cooperation of the national forests, national parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and three state wildlife agencies.

Today, as we debate delisting and transferring grizzly bear management to the states of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming I have grave concerns. First, I am concerned about the future of the grizzly's major foods. At the core of the ecosystem Yellowstone Park has suffered a drastic decline of cutthroat trout, an important spring food source, and throughout the ecosystem's high country we are witnessing the drastic die-off of the white-bark pine, an important fall food for bears.

Coupled with warming temperatures and continuing drought, the landscape and resources that helped bring the grizzly back from the brink of extinction now look to be in jeopardy.

I am also concerned about how the three states, particularly Wyoming, are going to manage grizzly bears once they are delisted. Wyoming is home to the bulk of the ecosystem's bears, and the Game and Fish Commission has given no assurance that it intends to maintain grizzly numbers at current levels, let alone allow the population to expand into suitable but as yet unoccupied habitat.

In fact, based on recent history, my guess is that the state will be more aggressive in its removal of so-called "problem bears," with the intent of reducing grizzly numbers.

Witness the department's recent killing of bear 760, a young male that spent most of its short life in Jackson Hole, often making itself very visible. Although sighted around people and developments, it never caused harm to anyone or damage to any property.

For the single reason of putting up with people and their

developments, 760 was trapped by Game and Fish personnel and hauled hundreds of miles away and released into a completely unfamiliar habitat harboring a robust grizzly population. Looking back it seems the agency's relocation of grizzly 760 was destined to fail.

The young bear's life ended when it was trapped again and euthanized after eating part of a deer carcass hanging near a hunter's house.

A lot of the grizzly bears killed for getting into "trouble" are those on the edges of the core population, locations where there is a greater chance of coming into contact with people and their property.

Coincidentally these fringe bears may also be those most inclined to move between the Greater Yellowstone and the northern Montana bear population, thus forming a connection between isolated populations and contributing to the genetic exchange necessary to prevent inbreeding.

As if these challenges weren't enough, it's clear that once delisting occurs the three states will open grizzly bear hunting seasons. How aggressive these hunts will be remains to be seen, but what is clear is that more grizzlies will die through state-sanctioned hunts.

Guiding grizzly management in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is the Interagency Grizzly Bear Management Plan signed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the various federal agencies and the three state game management agencies.

The plan sets the minimum grizzly population for the region at 500. With 700 or more bears now in the region, I have to wonder if the three states don't feel comfortable removing a lot of bears, even hundreds of bears, before they have to think about changing their management ways.

Until Wyoming and the other two states assure the public that they will manage the Greater Yellowstone grizzly population at or above current numbers, delisting is the wrong move. The great bear is facing too many critical environmental problems without having to suddenly face bullets and more traps because of an uncontrolled penchant for "removals" — aka killing more bears.

Jacksonite Franz Camenzind is a biologist, filmmaker and former head of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance.

GUEST SHOT

Franz Camenzind