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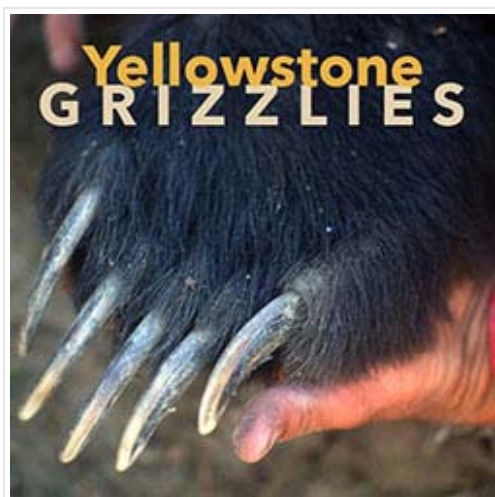
Grizzlies at risk on 2 million acres

by [Angus M. Thuermer Jr.](#) | APRIL 26, 2016

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Wyoming will “discourage” grizzly bears — likely by hunting — from thousands of square miles they currently occupy in the Yellowstone ecosystem, state officials said recently while describing pending plans.

Grizzly bears can’t easily live without conflict in 3,236 square miles they now occupy on the fringes of the Yellowstone ecosystem, Wyoming wildlife authorities say, and the federal government agrees. Consequently, grizzlies now living on some of the ecosystem edges won’t be counted in official censuses and will be moved off, killed or hunted, sometimes even before they conflict with human activities, pending state and federal plans say.



Nevertheless, after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removes the Yellowstone-area grizzly from the list of threatened species — a process that could be completed by the end of this year — the agency will continue to monitor grizzly populations in the core of the ecosystem. Area managers will strive for a population of 674 bears in the 19,270 square-mile central zone known as Demographic Monitoring Area. If that population is well distributed and fecund with breeding females, there's enough habitat and regulations to make federal wildlife managers confident grizzlies will persist.

Twenty-three percent — 3,236 square miles — of the Yellowstone grizzly's current range is outside of the proposed DMA. That means in some 2.1 million currently occupied acres, grizzly bears, literally, won't count. In Wyoming's share of that 23 percent, grizzlies will be tolerated begrudgingly, if at all, state plans say, even if they're living in good biological habitat.

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Wyoming is reviewing its conservation strategy that outlines this framework. The federal government has set a May 10 deadline to comment on a [suite of delisting documents](#).

Nobody knows fringe area grizzly count

Neither Wyoming nor federal officials know how many grizzlies live in the fringe habitat outside the DMA. Although one study says 23 percent of bears' occupied habitat is outside the DMA, retiring federal grizzly coordinator Chris Servheen disputes the calculation. Regardless, there's no way those areas could also account for as much as 23 percent of the population, he said.

From 1986 to 2015, 24 females with cubs have been seen in the fringe areas — most of them in the last decade, Wyoming Game and Fish Chief Game Warden Brian Nesvik said. Most of those were within 4 miles of the DMA boundary but they weren't just passing through. Occupied habitat is "places where denning occurs on an annual basis," he said. "It does mean there's an established population there. The data we collected isn't complete enough to be able to use it for a separate population estimate."



Icy Grand Teton grizzly family

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Fringe grizzly bears aren't necessary to the ecosystem population, the two wildlife agencies agree. There is enough "suitable habitat" inside the DMA.

"We think the suitable habitat is sufficient to support a healthy grizzly population," Servheen said. "We're going to always to have bears outside it."

When Servheen's federal agency defined "suitable habitat," that designation required biological suitability and also "social tolerance" by people, according to the framework of pending management plans. "We had to draw a line," Servheen said.

That line excludes places that grizzly bears have now colonized — like the northern part of the Wyoming Range — and has sparked reaction. "We consider this... 'socially unacceptable' designation as a sign that Wyoming intends to remove these bears, most likely through the mechanism of trophy hunting," Wyoming Wildlife Advocates wrote to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Servheen and his agency remain focused on a core population, nevertheless. "Bears outside the DMA, if they live outside on a continual basis, have a limited future," Servheen said. "Bears in those places — private land, close to ranch operations — that's not what we're trying to manage for. The bears inside [the DMA] are the future — that's the recovered population."

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"When we drew the line for suitable habitat, we didn't have grizzly bears and [did have] 60,000 sheep down there," he said of the Wyoming Range. "We're not going to move sheep where grizzly bears haven't been for decades — it's not necessary."

"We did not push the envelope," Servheen said. "It's a commonsense approach to things. If we did not have enough habitat ... it would be a different story. We pick our battles."

Servheen rejects any notion that local sentiments and governments — social tolerance — held sway over federal decisions about where the grizzly should live. There's a geographic divide on the topic. One online petition against grizzly hunting has drawn 116,000 supporters from the Web universe. In contrast, Fremont County Commissioners passed a resolution declaring grizzlies unwanted there.

Despite Fremont's resolution, Servheen said part of that county was included in the DMA, albeit largely in national forest wilderness areas. "We have to balance the needs of people with the needs of bears," he said. "How close to communities can you expect to have bears?"

Wyoming is ready to answer that question. As its draft conservation plan says, "grizzlies occupying areas outside of the DMA contribute little to population due to conflicts with humans and livestock."

Wyoming won't wait for conflicts to happen. "We do preemptive moves of grizzly bears," Wyoming Game and Fish large carnivore leader Dan Thompson told a gathering of more than 100 people at an agency hearing in Jackson earlier this month. "If they're on their way to a subdivision when there's no [bear-proof] food storage..."

Never mind the fringes, core bears count

Servheen is confident the number of bears in the DMA is sufficient to keep the population going, even to the point that it could sustain hunting if Wyoming, Idaho and Montana choose to have seasons. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service has catalogued the threats to the population, addressed those threats, proposed a conservation plan to ensure threats won't re-emerge, and laid out requirements for a diverse, healthy population that is spread out in the center of the DMA.

"The [Proposed Rule](#) outlines the details of all the threats and why we think all those threats are addressed," he said. The federal [Conservation Strategy](#) is a "post-delisting management plan that will guide management of all the bears and their habitat."

Also, updated [demographic recovery criteria](#) for the Yellowstone ecosystem population sets mortality limits, outlines census practices in the Demographic Monitoring Area including the smaller Primary Conservation Area inside the DMA. Managers have divided this smaller Primary Conservation Area into 18 Bear Management Units across which females with young must remain well distributed.

"It is important the conservation strategy reflects the details [regarding threats to grizzlies] in the Proposed Rule," and how those will be ameliorated, Servheen said. "We're eager for the public to comment on that."



"We'd like the strategy to be the document that, 20 years from now, a new manager could pick it up and say 'I know how to do this.'"

If the population remains within proposed federal parameters, if other demographic goals regarding distribution and population makeup are maintained, if enough habitat is guaranteed secure, the agency won't oppose hunting, other than to prohibit shooting females with cubs at their side.



Feelings run high about hunting

After federal and state conservation plans are established and the grizzly is delisted, Wyoming would have to take several steps before hunters could take to the field — [in the fall of 2017 at the earliest](#). First the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission would have to set a population objective for grizzly bears in Wyoming.

Today there are officially 717 grizzly bears in the DMA. Wyoming has 58 percent of the DMA territory, which means if bears are distributed evenly, the state's portion of the DMA could be home to 416 bears.

"The commission has to establish an objective before it determines ... if there's going to be a need for a decline," Nesvik said in an interview. When asked at the Jackson hearing how Wyoming would keep grizzlies in check, he said it would be through "discretionary mortality," a euphemism that includes hunting. "There is really no other way."

At the Jackson hearing, participants passionately debated hunting. Tourism has skyrocketed in the Yellowstone area and everybody wants to see a grizzly bear, Sierra Club representative Lloyd Dorsey said; "The grizzly bear is in this sense the most valuable animal in Wyoming."



But hunters maintain that it's been their tax dollars paid on sporting goods and hunting fees that have helped the bear's comeback. "I think you're making a [mistake] not making a commitment to us that these bears will be hunted," Bob Wharff, director of Wyoming Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife said.

"How many bears are enough?" asked Karl Allred, president of Wharff's organization. "When a bear walks into a subdivision, those people have a right to expect safety. That bear has to be removed one way or another."

Although national park and forest managers would disagree, Allred asserted that wildlife management is a state's issue. "The feds don't have any legal right to manage [wildlife] in Wyoming," he said.

Reverting to hunting would be a step backward, conservationist Debra Patla said. "It's like you're living in some long-past decade," she said in Jackson. An audience member said Wyoming hunters killed 36 grizzlies between 1970 and 1975, the year federal protections were imposed, figures WyoFile could not immediately confirm.

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Tourism professionals fear the loss of what grizzly advocate and photographer Daryl Hunter called "revenue bears," those that tourists see regularly in national parks. Some wander easily and often outside those protected enclaves and could be hunted, should Wyoming open a season. They seek a no-hunting buffer around parks.

There should be no hunting in the Primary Conservation Area — a subzone inside the DMA where bears are monitored for even distribution, Hunter said. Under pending plans,

hunting would only be prohibited in the two national parks. "I'd ask them not to shoot our revenue bears in the Teton Wilderness."

Wyoming's track record on wolves doesn't bode well for grizzly tourism wildlife guide and biologist, Tenley Thompson, said. The hunting death of one Grand Teton wolf outside the park cost her \$250,000, she said.

"You ignored us," she told officials. "I have no confidence in Wyoming Game and Fish's ability to protect our economic interests."

Wyoming's conservation plan is lacking in that regard, Author Earle Layser said. "You need to talk about economic value. When I read your plan, that doesn't come through."

Rancher and outfitter Brian Taylor, who operates on the edge of Grand Teton, said hunting would not be a windfall for outfitters. "It's not a big shot in the arm for them.

"The buffer zone is a horrible idea," he said. "It sets a bad precedent." He returned to the central position of the federal and state wildlife agencies — that the future of the Yellowstone grizzly is secure and it's time for Wyoming to take over.

"Trust me," he said about Wyoming Game and Fish Department, "they're not going to let them go extinct."

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3 Responses to *Grizzlies at risk on 2 million acres*



Paul Cook APRIL 30, 2016 AT 8:01 AM <#>

[REPLY](#) —

Boutique grizzly management?

wilson, Wyoming



Bill Baehr APRIL 26, 2016 AT 8:44 PM <#>

[REPLY](#) —

If the NPS would train the bears to fear people rather than let them habituate, the bears would be safer and so would the people.

Moose, Wyoming



Keith Collins APRIL 26, 2016 AT 8:35 AM <#>

[REPLY](#) —

If you don't want any grizzlies killed then it's time to advocate for a capture-and-transplant program. Just like with our bighorn sheep, we need to capture excess grizzlies and send them to other states in the west. Colorado has sufficient habitat (and already has a few grizzlies). California has sufficient habitat, and even has a grizzly on its flag. Instead, you seem to want grizzlies to reach the saturation point in northwest Wyoming (which they are doing) and then spread "naturally." That won't work very quickly and lots of bears will die, as they push each other out of the mountains and into the people-populated prairie regions. Transplants will work much faster, just like it did with the Canadian wolves released in Yellowstone in the late 1990s.

Cody, Wyoming

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