

**The Grizzly Beat
Episode Number 8
Michelle Uberuaga
Transcript
May, 2016**

Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox and the Grizzly Beat, and we're here with Michelle Uberuaga, Michelle is the Executive Director of the Park Country Environmental Council, a grassroots conservation organization operating north of Yellowstone National Park in a county the size of Rhode Island. Michelle works to protect grizzly bears, wolves and bison that are part of her beat.

Michelle, you started out studying biology, and then you went to law school at University of Montana when President Bush was working to dismantle the country's environmental laws. But you had the idea you'd become an environmental litigator. And yet now here you are in Park County, the director of a grassroots group on the edge of Yellowstone. What changed your path?

Michelle Uberuaga: Um, that's a great question. Yeah you know I think that in order to affect change, you got to have a lot of tools in your toolbox. And I had worked as a grassroots organizer, and it kind of felt like we hit a lot of walls under the Bush Administration. And litigation seemed like a really important tool. And so I went to law school. And I did do a little bit of environmental litigation, and I still do.

But I don't work for a traditional firm. I work in my basement on issues as they arise that I can fit into my schedule. But I get to balance that with working on grassroots efforts right in my community with the people here that are kind of on the front line of so many of these really big important environmental issues. And I think I'm really a people person, so I like to be able to be out in our community working with people, and then when the time comes to sit at the desk, I can do that as well.

GT: So Michelle can you talk a little bit more about some specifics, like what kind of issues and how you work in a grassroots way in the community?

MU: Yeah, so I think the important part of grassroots to me is that we are, at Park County Environmental Council, there's two staff and a board, and so with a really small organization. And our role is to work with the community to empower community members, to empower community leaders, to help them protect our community.

So we're seen with people on issues that matter to them. And that means setting up educational meetings and providing information, sharing what we're learning with people in the community, connecting community leaders to their elected officials and making sure that their voices are heard -- kind of not just locally, but also all the way up to the

top. And that also includes participating in all sorts of different community events and talking about the environmental issues that matter here.

GT: Can you describe perhaps a particular success that Park County Environmental Council has faced?

MU: Yeah, I can speak to a small, this is a small, but I think a really nice success story. PCEC for a long time organized annual electronic waste clean-ups and that required a lot of volunteers, and bringing in a company to gather the waste. And then eventually because it was so effective, the county just took that program over. So we no longer had to do that, and now the county gathers e-waste. So that's an example of kind of building the demand and then showing that this can be something that needs to stick around.

So that's one victory. And then we've had some bear victories in the past as well. And I can maybe save that for our bear conversation -- or do you want to hear about that?

GT: Go for it!

MU: To get ready to chat with you today, Louisa, I got to sit down with PCEC's first Executive Director, Jim Barrett, and PCEC's been around since 1990 but he came on, our first staff person, so it was an all-volunteer board until 1998 and Jim lived in Cooke City -- and I think part time maybe in Livingston as well. I think he came in 1975, right as the bears were going on the Endangered Species list, and he's been there since. And so he's seen the evolution of bears interacting, coexisting with people and local communities.

And he was sharing the story of how bears were spectacles, kind of just wandering through back yards and eating garbage, and how Cooke City -- the dump was just a place where food was literally piled, which was also common in the Park in that time. I think they even put bleachers up around, they eventually had bleachers. People could come and watch the bears And it was thought of as a really positive thing at one point. And then they started to realize that eating garbage was not good for bears. And they had to work to change that.

And so Jim, through his work at PCEC and with some other groups, was really instrumental in changing the way Cooke City managed garbage. And they closed the dump. Then they moved it into town. And it sounds like it went through, there was a dump in town that, at first, was a dumpster, but the bears could of course still get in them. And then they put a fence around it, but the bears would crawl over the fence. And they put an electric fence up and that didn't do much.

And then eventually they had some success when they worked with the Department of Transportation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and they got some money brought in to the community to build an enclosed trash compactor in Cooke City, so that all the waste went into the building was compacted in there. And Jim describes that as the real win-win. Everybody was happy. It was good infrastructure for the community, it helped

the bears and it reduced conflict, so that was a good victory, and then other communities around the edges of the Park have done some more things with waste management, so.

GT: That's great. I know you've been spending a lot of your time working in the Paradise Valley north of Yellowstone Park on a particularly interesting and problematic threat to grizzly bears and the environment in general. And that is a mine, a proposed new mine that a Canadian company is bringing to the Emigrant Peak and Paradise Valley area that has the community up in arms. Can you talk about what the impacts of that mine would be and what PCEC is doing about it?

MU: Yeah, so Lucky Minerals Inc. has proposed a pretty large industrial scale gold mine operation in Emigrant Gulch. We learned about it last June through a scoping letter from the Forest Service. And it really wasn't until we took a look at the company's website, which really tell what their full plans were. The scoping letter kind of talked about some exploratory drilling on public lands, but the company's website was way more expansive.

And so ultimately they had staked claims on over 2,500 acres on both private and public lands in Emigrant Gulch. That covers a lot of area back there, and three drainages to the Yellowstone River -- and so Emigrant Creek and over into Mill Creek and then over to the Six Mile drainage as well. So, it potentially could have devastating impacts on our waterways.

Of course, gold mining does not have a good history of protecting water. We have gold being mined from the sulfide ore body, which leads to acid mine drainage, and that can have really devastating impacts on aquatic life.

But the Emigrant area is also home to grizzly bears, wolverines and lynx. And I've heard just anecdotal stories from colleagues that: "oh Emigrant, that's the only place I've ever seen lynx in the wild," and "I saw wolverine prints up there." And even a local landowner who claims to have seen a wolverine in the wild. And then bears are also very common. One of our county commissioners who's supportive, Steve Caldwell, talks about running into grizzly sign on top of Emigrant Peak, so lots of wildlife.

And then it's also really important, just community recreational access. And then not to mention the businesses there that depend on that, like Chico Hot Springs and the vacation rentals. And the community really responded very quickly and effectively and in a unified manner in opposition to this type of development. So it was a really rewarding when we started spreading the word through community meetings, just a huge outpouring. Just the way the community was rallying to do whatever needed to be done.

It was really empowering, really exciting. Exciting in the sense that in these situations, with big mining companies, I think, local communities often feel helpless and we responded so strongly, so quickly -- we're actually winning, I would say now, and we've got a good chance of stopping this mine. Of course you've got potentially years and years

more to go and lots and lots of hurdles, but we got in really early, so hopefully we can start stopping them before there's even boots on the ground up there.

And then there's also a second mining proposal in our valley. At Crevice, a little bit different situation than, a slightly smaller company. Lucky Mineral has Canadian backing they're actually a Canadian company. This Crevice has Australian backing. Their proposal's all private land, but the developer wants to dig underground. He claims it can do a massive gold mine with very little surface area disruption by digging underground tunnels onto the public lands.

GT: Right on the border of Yellowstone Park aren't they?

MU: Yes, exactly. And right in the Primary Conservation Area for grizzly bears, so also really important wildlife habitat.

GT: And one of the big issues with mines is that under the 1872 Mining Law, the federal government really can't say "no" to a mine, and so the grizzly bear and other species will, if it goes forward, get the short end of the stick.

MU: Yeah. And there's a lot of frustration, I think, with the 1872 Mining Law but that's the unfortunate reality. It's a slow march towards a mine. We can use our environmental laws, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Montana Environmental Policy Act, to review the process to make sure that they're abiding with the law but ultimately, it does look like permitting the mine is the end of the road. There are some strategies though that we are working on to protect the public lands that surround the private mining claims. So there are ways to do that under the 1872 Mining Law, which we're exploring right now.

GT: Good going. And also the political base of support that you're developing is really critical. And I guess that gets me to another question for you with the diversity of Park County -- which of course has a timber mill and a hardcore ranching base on one hand, and also on the other, movie stars and artists and committed liberals, including a prominent Bernie Sanders constituency. What are you doing to find a base of support given the wild diversity that we have here?

MU: I like the way you put that. It's true we have a very eccentric community, which makes it a really cool, fun place to live and raise children. I would say that I think you really have to be open minded and find common ground. You have to recognize that there's so many different people that think different ways and you meet on the street or at the grocery store and you chat at the coffee shop. And then you're in community meetings maybe on opposite sides, maybe on the same side depending on the issue.

So I think it's a really important reminder of treating people with respect and recognizing that you can disagree in respectful ways. And that way when it comes time to work together, it's not a problem because you've got relationships that can survive disagreements and thrive when there are opportunities to work together. And I think that that's critically important.

And our mine campaign has been an issue that's really brought people together across political lines. There's a real diverse group of people that don't want to see mining in our valley for lots of different reasons. Some that care vehemently about wildlife and grizzly bears and wolves, and others that care more about whether or not that changes the quality of life and therefore the quality of employees that they can hire at their business. So I see a really diverse range of reasons why people are opposing the mines.

GT: Michelle, you work obviously on a very, very local basis, but you also work on a national scale, and recently you initiated a nationwide petition drive for grizzly bears on change.org and so far it's garnered over 100,000 signatures opposed to grizzly bear delisting. Maybe you could talk about your views on delisting of Yellowstone grizzly bears and what do you hope the petition will accomplish?

MU: As a local group faced with these national issues, we were lucky to have access to all sorts of different tools online and that petition that you mentioned, it was actually through Care2. Which is the petition site for the competitor of Change, but they're similar, and I just went on there today and we have 117,000 signatures. So then the question was...could you remind me of the question again?

GT: What your views on delisting are, how you got started with this petition and what you hope it will do?

MU: Of course, why did we do the petition? So, the delisting issue, I came across, it was creating a lot of concern in our local community last summer and fall, the writing was in the sand that this was coming down the pipes. We were so lucky in Park County to have not only that great diversity of politics, but also some renowned scientists that work on these issues.

One of those is Dr. Jesse Logan, who's on the PCEC board. And Jesse and I were chatting along with other grizzly bear advocates including Doug Peacock this summer about the fate of Yellowstone grizzly bears and what it would mean for them to be delisted and what we could do locally, and so that kind of spurred our efforts. PCEC, our board, is very concerned about delisting the grizzly bears, and working to protect grizzly bears has been a part of our mission since we were founded in 1990, so it's not new territory, but it's definitely a big issue. We have to be thoughtful about how we dive in and what we can do, but inevitably the concern is that we don't think that Yellowstone's grizzly bears are ready for delisting.

When I look at my numbers here it was in 2015, last year, there was about 70 bears, this is -- Jesse sent me some science here -- 70 bears were killed. So that was about 10 percent of the total population. Of course grizzly bears are the slowest reproducing mammals in North America. That's a pretty high mortality rate, and I don't think you have to be a Ph.D. in ecology to understand that.

The other I think big obvious concern for us is climate change. And not, again, it's something that I think resonates with our local community and across the country and across the world. Our species all around the world face the threat of a changing climate. I think that that threat is particularly dire for grizzly bears. So that's a big concern and climate change is changing bears. Their food sources, they're losing some critical food sources.

We're concerned about grizzly bears as an isolated population. All bear advocates share this concern, that we need grizzly bears. They can't exist in an island population, Yellowstone National Park. They need to be able to migrate north, and removing the bears from the endangered species list and opening up state-led trophy hunts is not going to help bears move north -- and in fact it will probably prevent that from happening. So the hunting of grizzly bears is also a huge concern. Residents in Park County, members of PCEC, are not eager to hunt grizzly bears. I would be really disappointed to see that happen.

GT: Well it's a huge response you've gotten and far beyond Park County.

MU: That's the other thing is we have impacts in our local community, but really grizzly bears matter to not just this local community but to the country and to the world. And I think that's what the petition demonstrates, is that when we were able to circulate it to a national audience, and it's really picked up momentum, and so those 120,000 signatures or 117,000 that we've got right now, are from all over the country and all over the world.

GT: Must be pretty gratifying. So Michelle, you and your husband have two children, Luca and Neva. What kind of effect of growing up near Yellowstone and your work seem to be having on them and what do you hope they grow up with?

MU: I was really lucky to grow up in a national park community and I think that it helped shape my worldview. And I want a similar experience for my children. And I want them to spend lot of free time outside in wild places and I want them to understand the diversity of an ecosystem means, and that there are large predators like grizzly bears and wolves, and there are diversity of birds.

My four year old loves birds of prey. And my two year old can identify the difference between elk, moose -- all sorts of different wildlife species -- that I think are probably not even common language for most two year olds. So I think growing up in a place like this, your whole worldview is different, because you see yourself as part of an ecosystem or I hope that they see that. I think it's a really special thing.

GT: Well thank you. Thank you Michelle, we're with Michelle Uberuaga and The Grizzly Beat. Thank you very much.