

The Grizzly Beat: Interview 2, Chuck Neal
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Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times and today I'm delighted to be speaking with an old friend and colleague, Chuck Neal. Chuck is an ecologist who spent 40 years with the Departments of Agriculture and Interior with a special focus on wilderness and habitat in the Rockies. From New Mexico to Montana, Chuck has a passion for grizzly bears and spent countless hours in Yellowstone's backcountry and he's written a fascinating book, *Grizzlies in the Mist*. Chuck, maybe you could share a bit about what drew you to grizzly bears.

Chuck Neal: I would say, as briefly as possible, that the grizzly bear has always been the symbol of wild America. I've often said the wolf may be the voice of wild America, but the grizzly bear is the symbol, the spirit of wild America. It's a highly iconic species and looking ahead through the lens of an ecologist, it became apparent early on that he is what we call an umbrella species. If we can protect a suitable habitat for our bear to have a self-sustaining population, we can also protect the habitat needed for the great host of other species that occupy our western wildlands. So he became a symbolic inspiration to me as well as a more pragmatic ecological barometer by which to measure the health of our western wildlands.

GT: The federal government has recently announced a proposal that would remove federal protections from Yellowstone grizzly bears, perhaps later in 2016. Do you think grizzly bears are ready for this? And what do you think might happen after delisting?

CN: Well, I do not support this delisting proposal. It's another one of these recurring proposals by the federal grizzly bear recovery folks apparently designed to appease the political power structure and to three interior Rocky Mountain States where we do have bears.

As far as I'm concerned, from my perspective, it will stop the recovery of grizzly bears in its tracks. By that I don't mean to say it's going to mean the elimination of the bear population. There will continue to be a grizzly population in the Yellowstone Ecosystem, that is the area directly around the Park itself, for an indeterminate amount of time, but they are not going to be what we could call a recovered population. They're going to be more appropriately termed a "relic population", an open air zoo population, as it were, because recovery itself, which requires an expanding population into previously occupied habitat by bears, historically occupied, that would no longer be taking place.

The plan itself calls for basically disregarding bears outside of this circle that the feds consider a demographic monitoring area and those bears will be considered expendable, and no doubt will be removed either through legal hunting or typical control actions. So no, I don't think the bear population is ready to be listed as recovered. They are recovering. They are not recovered.

GT: Chuck, as you emphasize in your book, Forest Service lands outside Yellowstone and Grand Teton Parks are particularly important to grizzly bear recovery. Why do you think that is so, and what are your concerns about what happens on these lands after delisting?

CN: Well the future of the grizzly as I've written actually lies with the Forest Service on national forest lands. The public lands belonging to all Americans, because the parks we have, whether it's Yellowstone or Grand Teton within this particular ecosystem are simply not large enough to maintain a fully viable self-sustaining bear population, so it is essential that the Forest Service steps up and does its part in permitting bears to occupy all biologically suitable habitat on lands under their stewardship -- and there are plenty of them out there. There are hundreds of thousands of acres of national forest land that are suitable for bear occupation today.

However, there is a conflict over who really controls those lands and that conflict primarily, not exclusively, but primarily comes from the livestock industry who have grazed these lands for probably a century or more, and they still see these lands as belonging rightfully to them. From my perspective it's simply a question: is society going to let that status stand? Are we going to allow our public lands be used primarily for private livestock taking precedence over public wildlife, or are we going to turn that around and say public lands must have a priority use for public wildlife rather than private livestock? And if we take that parameter to how we're going to measure our use of our public lands i.e., national forest lands, the future would be relatively bright for the grizzly bears, because he is then permitted to occupy historically occupied grizzly bear habitat, which includes hundreds of thousands of acres of national forest land. So I see that as the real key, that the forestlands are the real key to a fully recovered grizzly bear population.

GT: You've talked about the importance of connecting Yellowstone grizzly bears to other populations. Can you go into that in more detail? What does connectivity look like?

CN: Well if you go back to my definition of a recovered population. This is a population of bears large enough to withstand the genetic demographic environmental catastrophic uncertainties and maintaining a self-sustaining population over several centuries. Now that kind of population is going to be larger than anything we have within what we now call the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It's going to require more land than what we have in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. And that, of course, leads to the obvious conclusion that we need linkage zones that we connect the Yellowstone populations to other sub populations to, in turn, create one large, what I refer to in ecological jargon as a "meta-population" of bears scattered throughout the U.S. Northern Rockies. This potential is still there.

We have a vast area in central Idaho, the central Idaho wildlands, generally referred to as the Salmon-Selway-Bitterroot wildlands area. That is presently unoccupied by any sustaining bear population. It's possible one or two bears have wandered in there, but there is not a sustainable grizzly bear population they've been killed off. Historically

there was quite a robust grizzly bear population. Now there was a plan developed perhaps 20 years ago, back during the Clinton administration, to start translocating sub-adult bears into the central Idaho wild lands, the Salmon-Selway-Bitterroot I'm referring to, five bears a year for about five years for a total of about 25 bears, with the hope and belief that that population would then grow, and the habitat being as good as it is, it would certainly be able to probably carry 200+ bears.

If this plan had been carried out, or if it were be carried out today, the potential would be there a very strong and there is a good potential, that we could have connection, connectivity between that population and the Greater Yellowstone population, which is trying to expand westward even as we speak. We now have bears in the Centennial range and the Gravelly range and the Snow Crest range of southwest Montana. If we take some precautionary moves, again, of public land agencies, and in the case of southwest Montana would involve not only U.S. Forest Service lands, it would also involve U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands, which are there in abundance in southwest Montana. Some precautionary regulations to permit safe passage, so to speak if I can use that term, for bears that attempt to link their populations between the central Idaho country and Greater Yellowstone country. That's what I'm talking about when I refer to connectivity.

In a nutshell, if we do not have that kind of connectivity, and if we do not have this expanded occupation of suitable habitat, we will never have a recovered grizzly bear population. Never. I'm not trying to over dramatize that word, but anything as currently being proposed that is less than that i.e., keeping bears in a snug little area around the Park will never achieve recovery.

GT: Chuck, what do you think might be the impacts of a hunt the prospects of connectivity?

CN: A hunt, Louisa, would be about the worst possible suggestion they could come up with. We can be sure the hunt will be directed at bears outside of this magic line around Yellowstone Park. The DMA's I was referring to as. The hunt would be specifically selected toward those individual bears outside of that line and those are exactly the bears that are trying to re-colonize historical habitat. Let me put it another way. The grizzly bears outside this DMA are actually the most important bears in the Yellowstone Ecosystem today. I'll restate that, they are the most important grizzly bears in the Yellowstone Ecosystem because they are the ones trying to re-colonize historic bear habitat and they will be precisely the bears eliminated by selective hunting.

So hunting on top of what already takes place every year in terms of grizzly bear mortality would be the worst possible suggestion they could come up with. In practical terms we already have a grizzly bear hunt every year and it's called elk season. When scores of bears are killed I think this past year it was 40 or 50 during the hunting season. So not only would that be an additional mortality on top of the mortality takes place on elk season and control action by so-called Wildlife Services, it will be taking out the most important bears in the ecosystem, those colonizers.

GT: Chuck, you alluded to changes needed in the public process involved in decision-making. Making public lands agencies answer to the broader public, not a well-heeled few. How do you suggest doing that?

CN: That's an excellent point, and as I mentioned earlier the recovery of grizzly bears will not take place until we get the public involved in management of the public lands. It's historically, I'm going to say historically, I'm talking about for the last century or so, the livestock industry has controlled the agenda on public lands and the middle to last century we begin to get laws that directed agencies toward multiple use on both forest and Bureau of Land Management lands which gradually tended to shift some of the direction of management of these agencies toward a more comprehensive vision of what the public lands really stood for. I say a gradual shift in that direction but always the understanding that the top was that livestock are supreme that they will always take the final call when the push comes to shove. So while there has been some movement it's just more or less at a snail's pace. So the public has to understand that these are their lands and by that, I mean public all across the country which at present, I don't believe they do.

If they understand these are their lands and do they want these public lands to be managed primarily for private livestock or do they want these public lands managed primarily for public wildlife? That is going to be the critical call as to the real future of the grizzly and for that matter other wide-ranging carnivores as well in the decades to come. Under this current proposal for delisting the grizzly the agencies are still indicating by this proposal they're still satisfied with the status quo. That is the final arbiter of what the proper use of public lands is and will remain the livestock use of these lands. Private livestock over public wildlife. And my point and what I was trying to say earlier, if that view holds, we will never achieve recovery of species such as the Yellowstone grizzly bear. We will be forced into managing for a relic population restricted to immediate environments of the Park but we will never have a recovery as I defined earlier.

So the public must be made aware of what they own and what they have at stake and how they do that? I don't know any other means other than education, and perhaps that's precisely what you're trying to do with your program.

GT: Chuck, you've lived around the Yellowstone ecosystem for decades now. Have you seen changes in that time in public attitudes about public lands and species like the grizzly bear?

CN: That's not an easy one to answer. I would say I can't give you a yes or a no. I can give you a yes and a no. By that ambivalence, I mean generally speaking, there is a sense of some degree of pride among locals that we have grizzlies. It's a sense of pride, but it doesn't seem to be a sense that dictates their actions. By that I mean they still have a sense of resentment toward the bear taking precedence on some decisions over what this crucial habitat form etc. etc. And they like to boast about the bear, we have grizzlies here and other areas don't, they consider that a sense of pride. At the same time they don't see the conflict in their view that we need to "manage" these bears back where they have a fear of man. And that kind of attitude tells me their pride is not very deep. They don't

want to show the tolerance that is going to be required to bring this bear back to its rightful place in our western heritage. They're not ready to show that degree of tolerance, they seem to be quite willing to accept the relic population and in that sense I would say locally they would be more support for this current delisting than not, because they see that as keeping the bear in its "place". That's kind of an ambivalent answer, but I think that's the best I can do for you.

GT: Chuck, along those lines, do you think that you would be seeing as much tolerance as you are relative to grizzly bears were it not for the protections supported by the Endangered Species Act since 1975?

CN: If it were not for the Endangered Species Act, Louisa, I think the bears would be just struggling to survive in Yellowstone Park today. That's the long and short of it. They simply would not be where they are today. The Endangered Species Act forced the states and forced us as a people to show a degree of tolerance for a large omnivore who on occasion can be dangerous, most of the time is not. We've been forced to show that tolerance and in the process have developed this kind of twisted form of pride as I said, but if it had not been for that protection under the Endangered Species Act, the bear would be living today as a small population, a relic population, within Yellowstone Park proper and that would be it.

GT: Back to a point you mentioned earlier, which is the role of the hunt and fear of man. You often hear that we need to hunt bears to instill in grizzly bears a fear of man. What do you think about that and what if any scientific justification is there?

CN: There is no scientific justification for that view whatsoever. How does a dead bear teach fear to his peers? It doesn't happen if the bear's dead. Now are the states planning to wound a mother bear here and there, and for the mother then to teach the cubs the fear of man? I mean I'd like to know how they're going to do that. It's not a feasible proposal. Now there is at least one way that might work. That one way would be if you intend to shoot the population down to where there's only say 10 percent left, you kill 90 percent of all the bears you have out there, you kill 90 percent, you have 10 percent left. By killing that many bears, you may well teach the remaining 10 percent fear and that may work, but who wants to do that? I mean who's going to propose killing the bears down to about 10 percent of the current numbers? So the idea that you're going to teach bears fear by hunting them has no scientific justification and is preposterous. Don't find anywhere where it's seriously being proposed.

GT: Chuck, you've often talked about the dramatic changes in native foods of the grizzly bear particularly white bark pine and Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Can you talk a bit more about the changes you've seen and what they mean to bears and recovery?

CN: There have been a shifting away from those foods that you just mentioned because they've been such a dramatic decline both whitebark and cutthroat. A number of bears are not in the Yellowstone Lake area proper so they've been looking for other foods

regardless. Here on the eastern side of the ecosystem whitebark has been a major part of their diet, and now that's no longer true.

Now often in this context the proposing agencies are saying how adaptable the bears are and they will shift to other foods. And I'm seeing myself more and more of the fruits, the berry crops that we do have, being consumed by grizzly bears each fall, so I think it's becoming more and more important for various berry crops like huckleberries, chokecherries to these bears on the east side, as they've lost their whitebark pine nuts. It's been a distinct shift, and bears spending more time actively seeking meat in the fall, which sometimes does cause trouble both for the bears and for people.

But where I have the biggest conflict with that philosophy being pushed by the agencies when they say bears are very adaptable and they can go to other foods, it's not that I question that bears are very adaptable because they are very adaptable and they're very intelligent, but they simply have to have the room to forage for these other, often less nutritious, foods. And the way they have the room to do that is by us showing the tolerance and letting them expand into all suitable habitats. You see I'm coming right back to where I was a few minutes ago in our conversation. The bears must be allowed to expand to all suitable habitats.

GT: One aspect of the delisting issue that you haven't discussed yet is the role of the states. The states will assume authority from the federal government over managing grizzly bears. How well do you think the states will do with that responsibility?

CN: Well the states have made it clear where they stand they're not being enigmatic about it. They intend to keep the bears back within a restricted zone around the park the so-called Demographic Monitoring Area or DMA. They intend to regard bears outside as somewhat surplus. They maintain there is no suitable habitat in other ranges like the Wyoming range, the Southern Wind Rivers, Salt River Range, etc etc. where there is actually plenty of habitat there, but it is being claimed by livestock industry. So my view is that the top-level opportunistic omnivorous carnivore such as the grizzly bear is simply too important a species to permit provincial views to take control over their management -- and that's exactly what will happen within the states.

The state politicians are much more captive of the special interest groups, again, the example being the livestock industry they will certainly push their agenda much more robustly than the federal oversight would permit. So I'm not a big fan of letting the states take management control over species such as the grizzly bear.

GT: Shifting gears, in your book *Grizzlies in the Mist*, you share a number of stories of your personal close encounters with grizzly bears. Do you have one experience or two that are particularly vivid in your mind that you would like to share?

CN: I often am asked that question. I continue to have experiences after the book was written, but it's hard to say any one that is. Every experience with a grizzly is vivid. Every one adds to your lifespan instead of detracting from it. I hesitate. There are some

that tend to stick out. I had multiple charges by bears and after I thought the charge thing was over they come roaring back. It stands out I guess. Another time I was surrounded by nine or 10 grizzlies all within 100 yards of me maybe. They were eating whitebark pine nuts while I'm sitting there in the middle of them. Some of those tend to be a little more strongly etched in my mind but every one is a special experience that, as I said, that simply adds to your allotted time on this earth rather than detract from it. So I probably can't do much better than that as far as say one is really more important than another.

GT: What do you think some of those charges were about?

CN: Oh the charges were about me blundering into their private space. It wasn't any really act of aggression on their part. They weren't, that is, a bear seeking out to hurt me. It was me blundering into their private area, and you must understand the grizzly bear is a very dignified bear. He really is. It sounds like an anthropomorphic type term. But there is no other way for us to describe since we are human. The bear is much more dignified than the black bear. He wants to be left alone and live in peace and quiet. We can continually stumble into his presence, so when I do that, when I've done it, he or she often will respond with a charge.

Now I suppose we could dwell briefly on what is a charge because many people say the bear is going to do this, do a bluff charge or has done a bluff charge, and my belief is that the charge is dictated by what you do, not what the bear does. If you act foolish, if you run, scream, shout or do something else foolishly, that charge will probably actually come or result in a contact with the bear and person, and the bear will take the person down and that could give you a good spanking in all likelihood. If the person acts soberly, responsibly, respectfully, and you simply talk to the bear and again, in my experience, and I've had more than 15 of these close type charges over the years, the bear will never touch you in all likelihood.

I've had bears come within six feet of me, on either side of me, in front of me, slide to a stop. They're so close they throw sticks and stones at my face, and I just continue talking and I've never had a claw or tooth mark on me. But I apologize to the bear while I was going through this process and the bear let me off. Sometimes with a second or third charge, but still let me off.

But if a person acts foolishly, this charge is going to result in contact in all likelihood and result in injury. And the bears are so enormously powerful that even a slight spanking on their part will result in serious injury on the human's part, so that's where people get hurt very badly. A bluff charge is kind of a misleading term, because bears don't say, "Hmm I think I'll charge this character and see what he does." That's not what they do. They charge instinctively trying to tell you to back off, stay out of my space, and then it's up to you to do the right thing.

GT: This gets to the importance of being prepared for a close encounter with a grizzly bear in the backcountry. Maybe you can touch now on bear pepper spray.

CN: Yes, I do recommend pepper spray. For many years I've never carried pepper spray at all. It's not that I don't think it's not effective. It is very effective, much more effective than carrying a hand gun for sure. But I just started carrying it and just few recent years just last four or five years, and the reason I did that was for political reasons rather than biological reasons.

I digress here just slightly if you'll allow me that luxury. I had a good friend that was killed by a bear in 2010. He never carried bear spray any more than I did. He was not killed because of the bear's aggressiveness at all. He was killed by a sloppy botched trapping operation by USGS, which left a drugged bear laying in an unmarked trap site and my friend stumbled into that. So since that time I've carried spray as I say for a political reason, and the political reason is this: a lot of folks around here know me. I don't want to sound immodest, but a lot of folks around here know about me and I decided, what if I continue not carrying spray and I were to get seriously injured in a bear confrontation somewhere out here someday, and it would be pointed out that the old man Chuck Neal wasn't carrying any spray, you see where that got him? See how truly dangerous these bears are? We need to kill them back. So I've decided maybe I shouldn't do this. Maybe in a political sense I should carry spray hoping that I won't be the cause of a more aggressive management process against the bears someday in the future based on what could have happened to me.

So the last several years I've just started carrying bear spray and I do recommend folks carry it. It is effective. It's been proven effective.

GT: Finally do you have hope that grizzly bears may someday be recovered?

CN: I don't think I'm going to see it in my lifetime, Louisa. I'm in my 80s now and once I had such delusions, but I really think recovery as I define it, I would be satisfied if you were to get serious about recovery -- and not even achieving it, but just being serious. And by serious I mean taking real steps, meaningful steps, about expanding bear habitat and laying out the welcome mat, and getting more bears in say central Idaho, and securing linkage zones. If the agencies would come up with things proactively like that, I would feel a sense of some confidence that recovery is going to take place. But given the current political atmosphere, I think we're going to continue to stumble along maintaining a relic population of grizzlies for the remainder of my life, which of course won't be very long. But I don't see it happening in my lifetime. Maybe in another generation, maybe.

GT: Chuck, thank you very much. This is Louisa Willcox with The Grizzly Beat and we're talking with ecologist, author and grizzly bear expert Chuck Neal.