

Karli Johnson, Sevens Livestock Co.

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Background and Bear Stories

My husband and I ranch on the eastern edge of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE). We raise Angus cattle and kids. We have a 2 year old little girl and 6 year old boy. We live in the heart of bear country, but also only a half mile west of Choteau Elementary, we live in people country too. The intersection of large apex predator's territory and American families can be a scary place to live. We witness those interactions repeatedly. I have a lifetime's worth of bear stories.

Here are some of the highlights. When I was a kid, my mom used to go on evening walks. We would all walk a half a mile to the bridge on the Teton River and she would continue to the end of the road while my brothers and I played for 15 minutes or so in the creek. One night she got to the end of the road and turned around in time to see a bear heading towards us. Can you imagine having a bear in between you and your kids? It all turned out alright. It now lives as a terrifying childhood memory for my brothers and me. That is the only encounter I can remember with a bear that wasn't aggressive but wasn't afraid. Both my brothers have been charged by aggressive Grizzly bears on different occasions near the house we live in now.

In more recent times with the increase in the bear population, the encounters have also increased. Our dog got swiped by a bear in our yard. The claw marks could be seen on his back. The dog survived. A couple summers ago, a bear walked through our yard, on our lawn, in broad daylight. The only reason our son wasn't riding his bike right where she walked was because it was windy that evening. Do you know any 4 year old's that equipped to handle an encounter with a Grizzly Bear? I don't. Under current rule that bear is not designated as a problem bear because she had never been aggressive or damaged any property. She was obviously comfortable around humans though. A few weeks before she walked through our yard she walked through the city park. This was at night but there were 37 boy scouts camping in the city park that night. I would venture to say that those 37 were not quiet and that bear knew they were there.

The old adage "they are more afraid of you than you are of them" is no longer holding true. The level of comfort that we are experiencing from the bears in our area in and around human dwellings is like I have never seen before. Twice this fall Choteau Elementary students could not walk home from school because at 2:00 in the afternoon grizzly bears were spotted in the city limits blocks from the school. This is becoming more and more dangerous.

Although, bears may not be aggressive. They are still predators. Given the circumstances they absolutely can kill. That female bear that walked through my yard and the city park is a great example of how that can change. She was back the following spring still frequently human areas, but she was not alone this time. She had three cubs with her. You do not need to be a wildlife biologist to know that most dangerous class of wildlife is a momma anything. When I saw them, they were running into a barn across the road from our house. I immediately reported it to our

bear management specialist. They came out and hazed her. This was particularly concerning as she was a half a mile from the elementary school. On a school day, during recess. Between the cracker shells I could hear the kids playing on the playground. It was the third time that week that they had hazed her. She did not go West or North away from town but East back towards town and the school with children playing. She hunkered down in some brush. It took the authorities another three days to get authorization to relocate her if they could safely catch her and her three cubs alive. Catching a sow and cubs is not only difficult but dangerous. Momma bears tend to get upset when their babies are trapped, and baby bears tend to wonder into traps without their mothers. Relocation almost never works as Grizzly Bears have a strong draw to their home territory. With hazing clearly not working, relocation is the next viable option.

The relocation sites are over capacity. That is one of the challenges with getting approval to relocate is that there just simply isn't a place to put them. When the relocation sites were set up, it was for a target population. The grizzly bear population in our area met that target by most estimations a decade ago some think up to two decades ago. Relocation and hazing are the two primary management tools under current rule. Both tools the population has outgrown.

The delay in authorization adds to the challenge of the management. In the three days, it took to get authorization the sow and cubs were hazed for a fourth time. The delay can also lead authorities to lose dangerous bears. There was a 90 minute delay to get authorization to euthanize a different grizzly bear that was coming out of a road ditch and attacking vehicles. This bear was clearly very dangerous. He punctured the hood of a neighbor's pick-up with his canines and was swatting at windows with paws. Had that bear been lost and someone driven by it on an ATV. The results would have been deadly. A bear that attacked someone outside of Choteau was lost. They never were able to find this aggressive bear. The delay in the response is one of the management issues that will very easily be corrected by turning over management to the state.

We understand that working with Grizzly Bears is part of our job. Our priority as ranchers is to be good stewards of the land. We have a generational understanding of the importance of putting the ecosystem that we work within first. That does not stop at the grass or crops, it includes wildlife. We understand that there needs to be a species balance that includes Grizzly Bears. The lack of tools for population management is putting us in a terrible position. The lack management is selecting for bears that are comfortable around human areas. That puts the safety of our families at risk.

It does not have to be this way. Not all bears are comfortable around human spaces but without population management those bears are at a disadvantage. Those bears are not benefiting from scavenging around human spaces, eating grain out of fields or energy rich placenta out of calving pastures. It's not just the people that need more management tools. It is also the good bears that are respectful of humans.

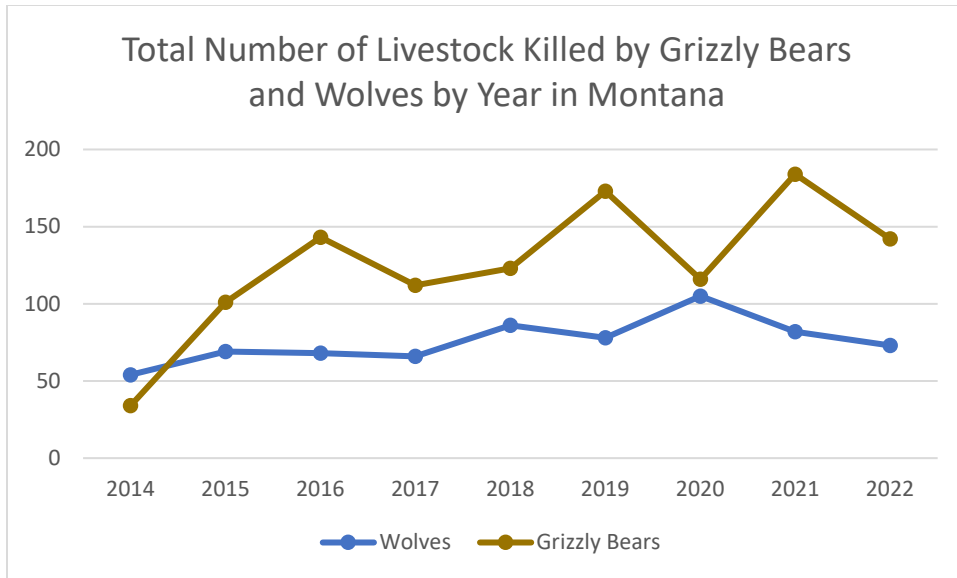
Adapting to Working and Living in Bear Country

We recognize that living in bear country means that we will need to adapt to be respectful of this great omnivore's needs. Below I have listed the adaptations that we have made to our own ranch and lifestyle. I share this to be clear that we have made all the adjustments we can. These have real financial, production and lifestyle costs.

- Changed flood irrigation
 - We do not irrigate at night anymore. Our flood irrigation infrastructure is set up for 8 hour sets and we are now doing 12. This decreases our yields and stand life.
- Change heifer calving date
 - We changed our calving date for the animals that need to calve at home on the river bottom to earlier when the bears are hopefully hibernating. Calving in February in Montana is hard. This year the weather was fine. Some years the weather is brutal. In 2021, it did not get above 15 below zero for two weeks while we had around 70 calves born. Those conditions are hard on the cattle and us.
- Do not raise vulnerable livestock
 - We do not raise sheep or pigs as they are more susceptible to grizzly bear predation.
- Erected a Grizzly Bear Fence
 - We put up a five foot woven wire fence with two electric strands. One on top and one on the outside bottom to prevent bears from climbing over or under the fence. The fence encompasses about 14 acres including our house, calving lots and barns. The project cost was proximately \$17,000. We received a Livestock Loss Board Grant for \$10,899.
- Always on alert when fencing or spraying weeds near brush.
 - We have a legal obligation to manage noxious weeds and repair fences. Many weeds are found in prime bear habit. Fences along river bottoms are notoriously difficult to maintain. Our area does not have access to childcare. Our kids work with us. Carrying bear spray with children around is dangerous.
- No longer take evening walks.
- No longer go swimming or fishing in the creek without extreme caution.

Losses Related to Grizzly Bears in Montana

We have not personally experienced livestock losses due to predation. My parents did when they had sheep and lived where we do now. Below are two graphs that show the trends in predation in Montana. This is based on data from the Livestock Loss Board. The Livestock Loss Board reimburses ranchers for livestock that has been confirmed by US Fish and Wildlife Services as being killed by a wolf, mountain lion or grizzly bear. Only losses that can be confirmed are compensated. There are many more kills that cannot be confirmed that are not included in this data. It is also worth mentioning that this incentives ranchers to try to find fresh kills while bears are often still present. Putting them at times in great danger.



The chart above reflects all of Montana not just the NCDE. The number reflects both confirmed and suspected kills.

| Year | Wolves | Grizzly Bears |
|------|---------------|---------------|
| 2014 | \$ 72,267.00 | \$ 55,151.71 |
| 2015 | \$ 80,769.22 | \$ 112,357.15 |
| 2016 | \$ 59,577.87 | \$ 108,394.27 |
| 2017 | \$ 63,504.91 | \$ 134,650.48 |
| 2018 | \$ 82,958.92 | \$ 113,560.43 |
| 2019 | \$ 82,450.39 | \$ 143,466.80 |
| 2020 | \$ 75,818.75 | \$ 97,526.24 |
| 2021 | \$ 102,931.60 | \$ 200,346.17 |
| 2022 | \$ 96,653.04 | \$ 128,406.79 |

Total dollars of claims paid by the Livestock Loss Board by year in Montana. 2022 numbers are to date. There are still claims being made for 2022.

There is also a cost associated with adapting to bear country for the city of Choteau. They have been asked to get bear proof garbage cans. The estimated cost 18 months ago for just the cans was over one million dollars. The specialty garbage truck would be an estimated additional million dollars. The city is also upgrading their street lights and adding lighting on the edge of town to make it easier to see a Grizzly bear if they are present. The cost of this project is estimated at \$500,000. While there is grant funding available for livestock loss mitigation, no grant funding has been found for preventing human encounters. The city is expected to cover they entire cost. The city of Choteau has around 1700 residents. The cost of this prevention work comes out to be \$1470 per resident.

While dollar figures can be placed on livestock lost, prevention work done, dollar figures cannot be given to the loss of human life that has occurred due to Grizzly Bear conflict. Those live serve

as a solemn reminder of just how important this work is and how delicate human and bear relationships are.

Conclusion

Current management has been set up for a maximum population that has been met. This larger population needs a different management strategy. Delisting the NCDE population of Grizzly Bears will give us the opportunity to implement the strategies needed to have a safe and sustainable population of Grizzly Bears. It would also give us the flexibility to adjust management to ensure that we are serving the bears and their human neighbors well.

Thank you for your time in considering the delisting of NCDE Grizzly Bear population. This is an issue that is deeply important to my family, community, and our good bear neighbors.