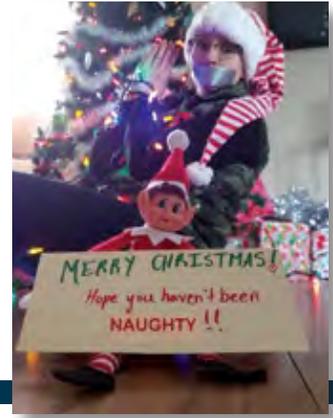


# Bullets for Recovered Bruins:

## Should We Hunt Grizzly Bears?

By Nissa Petterson, AWA Conservation Specialist



**H**unting has long been a divisive topic in Alberta. Hunting's controversial status rises from the personal values individuals, and sometimes governments, attach to wildlife. While all Albertans should have an equal stake in the province's wildlife, some people think their values give them greater claim. Take, for example, the recently approved sandhill crane hunt. This hunt sparked a contentious debate. Many people were outraged at the idea of hunting a bird known for its majesty and, in part, because of the risk of hunters mistaking sandhills for endangered whooping cranes. Others saw it as an opportunity to broaden their hunting skills and experiences. While both arguments may be valid, battle lines are still drawn and these debates obscure a position that both sides share – it's crucial to ensure that wildlife populations are thriving on the landscape.

As L. Scott Miller wrote, "...managing wildlife populations is really a matter of managing anthropogenic factors..." Healthy populations of wildlife are often regarded as a sure fire indication that we are managing our landscapes appropriately. Effectively managing Alberta's landscapes goes hand in hand with successfully managing the province's wildlife. If the former is done poorly the latter, including the legal hunting of wildlife, may very likely suffer.

When discussing the proposed sandhill crane hunt with *Alberta Outdoorsmen Magazine*, Minister of Environment and Parks Jason Nixon suggested he was encouraging his department to explore new hunting opportunities for Alberta: "Tundra swans or any species on the bird side that are hunted

in other jurisdictions are being investigated to find out if it's appropriate to have the same opportunities in Alberta." However, Alberta has already shot itself in the foot by prioritizing land-use activities above the ecological health of our landscapes and wildlife. In 2001, a Pembina Genuine Progress Indicator Report suggested that more than a quarter of Alberta's wildlife species were at risk, requiring special management and/or habitat protection measures to prevent further population declines. If Alberta is already failing to maintain healthy populations of wildlife on the landscape, how can we justify exploring new hunting opportunities?

AWA has long held a neutral position on hunting, emphasizing the importance that this land-use activity is scientifically justifiable and performed sustainably and humanely. Hunting is one of many land-uses that impact wildlife and wildlife habitat and game species must be demonstrably stable enough to handle proposed new hunting pressures. Our failure to prioritize healthy and robust wildlife populations over industrial or recreational land-uses is clearly demonstrated in the tenuous position on the land of our larger keystone species such as wood and plains bison, woodland caribou, and grizzly bears: they are all species at risk and, as such, cannot withstand the added pressure hunting would bring.

In Alberta, grizzly bears are considered "ecosystem engineers" because they deliver key ecosystem services to their surrounding environment. Grizzly bears help to regulate prey species such as elk and deer, propagate various plant species through the dispersal of seeds, and can aerate soils while forag-

ing. Their presence on the landscape can be representative of healthy forests and watersheds; they are, as detailed by Dr. Stephen Herrero, "indicators of sustainable development." The recognition of these important bear/ecosystems linkages to a healthy environment is true across various jurisdictions and cultures. Clark and Slocombe, 2009, explored the oral history of many western indigenous communities. Those histories emphasized the importance of grizzly bears to flourishing ecosystems, with some populations of grizzly bears being known to serve as "a significant vector of marine nitrogen into terrestrial forest ecosystems" in coastal and inland communities. This bear/ecosystem interaction, as described by Clark and Slocombe, increases the overall health and functioning of nearby riparian areas. In turn this enhances spawning and rearing habitat for salmonids, giving many species, including bears, more feeding opportunities.

Unfortunately, in Alberta, it is human activities and our respective land-use management approaches that are preventing grizzly bears from thriving on the landscape and fulfilling their ecosystem roles. Our damage to the functioning of the natural world ultimately reduces the vital ecological services that support the health and well-being of our own communities.

The road to recovery for grizzly bears in Alberta continues to be an arduous battle. Following a four-year moratorium on legal hunting of grizzly bears in Alberta, the species was designated threatened in 2010 under the *Wildlife Act*. To date, Alberta's recovery plan and management strategies for grizzly bears have yet to produce a signifi-



*Grizzly bear spotted foraging in Bighorn wilderness.* PHOTO: © K. UNGER

cant increase in population numbers. They have not demonstrated that populations can be self-sustaining in the wild without intervention. While there has been a lot of good work done to recover Alberta's grizzly bears, progress towards recovery across all Bear Management Areas (BMAs) has been rather slow. I suspect that, in part, this is due to the complexity that has been introduced by competing public values for the species, and the need to re-establish these important bear-ecosystem linkages – has been lost in the shuffle.

As described by Hughes and Nielsen (2019), many individuals living and working within bear country in Alberta are concerned over the presence of grizzly bears and what they perceive to be increasing population numbers. They fear this will increase human-bear encounters and increase risks to their safety. They also fear direct impacts to livelihoods through bear activities such as killed livestock or breached grain bins. These concerns generally translate into less tolerance for grizzly bears on shared landscapes, and a subsequent decrease in

support for conversation strategies. In their analysis of the grizzly bear policy discourse, Hughes et al 2020 also note the perpetuation of the “shoot, shovel, shut up” rhetoric when it comes to dealing with human-bear conflicts amongst these communities. Some participants even raised the topic of “re-establishing grizzly bear trophy hunting as a potential way to manage problem bears and build social tolerance...” in those respective communities. This option was challenged by biologists who highlighted the logistical difficulties of effectively implementing a problem bear hunt. This option would require rigorous identification methods, increased scientific monitoring, and could potentially further impede social tolerance for the species and the advancement of recovery efforts in the province. Similar sentiments are also present in southern jurisdictions such as Park County, Wyoming, where residents are actively seeking to have grizzly bears delisted because of coexistence issues.

Similar to Alberta, grizzly bear management in the lower 48 states has been a bit of a roller coaster. There are currently less

than 2,000 bears collectively that roam the lower 48 states, with source populations for the species residing within the Greater Yellowstone and the Crown of the Continent Ecosystems. While the species has made an impressive turnaround since the implementation of recovery efforts in the United States, many organizations and stakeholder groups are still not convinced that the grizzly bear population is healthy and stable. Others speculate that some major ecosystems have now surpassed carrying capacity for grizzly bears and have the potential to support limited draw hunts.

In May 2018, despite receiving over 185,000 public comments opposing the decision, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department voted 7-0 to approve a hunt outside of Yellowstone and Teton National Parks for 22 grizzly bears. In an interview with *Jackson Hole Daily*, hunting outfitter and Safari Club member Paul Gilroy described a potential hunt for the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as “...easily advertised and easily booked.” Gilroy added that, “It would be nice to be able to whack one [grizzly bear] that’s caus-

ing problems...” In fact, prior to 2017, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attempted twice to delist all or some populations of grizzly bears, with court rulings overturning the agency’s decision each time. It would seem that the push to delist grizzlies and renew the hunt is the desire of a select few that is supported by some state authorities; Wyoming had plans in motion to charge out-of-state hunters \$6,000 for a grizzly tag and Wyoming residents \$600, despite the fact that “between Yellowstone and Grand Teton alone, more than \$1 billion is generated annually through nature tourism...”, with a significant part of that attraction being the chance of seeing a wild grizzly bear.

The opposite was seen in British Columbia’s ban on trophy hunting grizzly bears in 2018. Grizzly bears were considered biologically sustainable passing thresholds for allowable hunting with an estimated 15,000 individuals, yet it was social and political opposition that were the deciding factors in banning the hunt. And provincial economics seem to favour this decision, given that bear viewing opportunities generate twelve times the economic revenues than guided non-resident and resident grizzly hunts. In Alberta, dominating conservative social values paired with political may land us in a similar position as Wyoming.

Given the tendencies of the UCP provincial government and its supporters, I don’t think it’s farfetched to suggest that, at the

very least, there will be discussion among conservatives in Alberta to reinstate the grizzly bear hunt as an attempt to appease a variety of groups. Hypothetically speaking, even if Alberta’s grizzly bears were deemed to be biologically recovered on paper, would it be appropriate to reinstate a hunt as a management tool for human-bears conflicts, or simply just because people want to hunt these apex predators?

When considering wildlife and landscape management decisions, we must ensure the process includes all Albertans and all values are represented fairly. We must also be mindful of the ecological impacts a management decision may have, and avoid adopting management strategies and policies that stem from skewed values or perspectives that are magnified by political will.

Regardless of the justification, whether it be for wildlife management purposes or broadening recreational opportunities, introducing new legal hunts on any species is a complex issue that should be cautiously approached in Alberta. One factor supporting caution is the declining state of most of our major ecosystems across the province. Currently, Alberta is experiencing an ongoing elevation shift of most of our major biomes, whereby biomes are moving further north as a result of a changing climate. As described by Schneider, 2013, this macro-scale shift will have significant impacts on the survivability of wildlife that have evolved

over centuries to live specifically in their surrounding environments. Even if these hunts are thought to be biologically sustainable, there remains concerns about the outlook for wildlife and their respective ecosystems, with the intensifying impacts of climate change and surging land-use activities. How much secure habitat will be available to support wildlife in the future?

If we consider the case for grizzly bears in either Canada or the United States, as the human population continues to grow, so too will habitat fragmentation and degradation, alongside increased human-bear conflict. Is it a responsible decision to have add hunting pressure on this species?

If we were to allow the reinstatement of a legal hunt on grizzly bears, it begs to ask, what precedence does this set for conservation in Alberta? Is it an honest reflection of all values Albertans have for wildlife? Or will the rhetoric of ‘because I want to’ or ‘because we can’ trump the precautionary approach to protecting wildlife, causing us to slip further away from the inherent value of having thriving wildlife populations on the landscape.

I worry that the discourse around wildlife management and conservation is Alberta is becoming one-sided. Albertans have entrusted government officials with the responsibility of managing our wilderness in a manner that is representative of all values and will serve to benefit all communities. However, given some recent management decisions from the provincial government – for example, the reduction of protected areas and removal of the Coal Policy – it seems that leeway is being made for personal narratives and values to dictate what approach the province should take.

We need to refocus our efforts on improving the state of our wilderness before we broach the topic of new hunting opportunities. We need to weigh the impacts our land use activities have on wildlife and wildlife habitat and understand that these are finite and fragile; they cannot support every activity, all the time. Being distracted from this goal will result in Albertans losing the wilderness that defines us. 🐾



Grizzly bear digs unearthen plant roots, while aerating soils. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY