High Country News

On thirty years of grizzly bear conservation in the Northern Rockies

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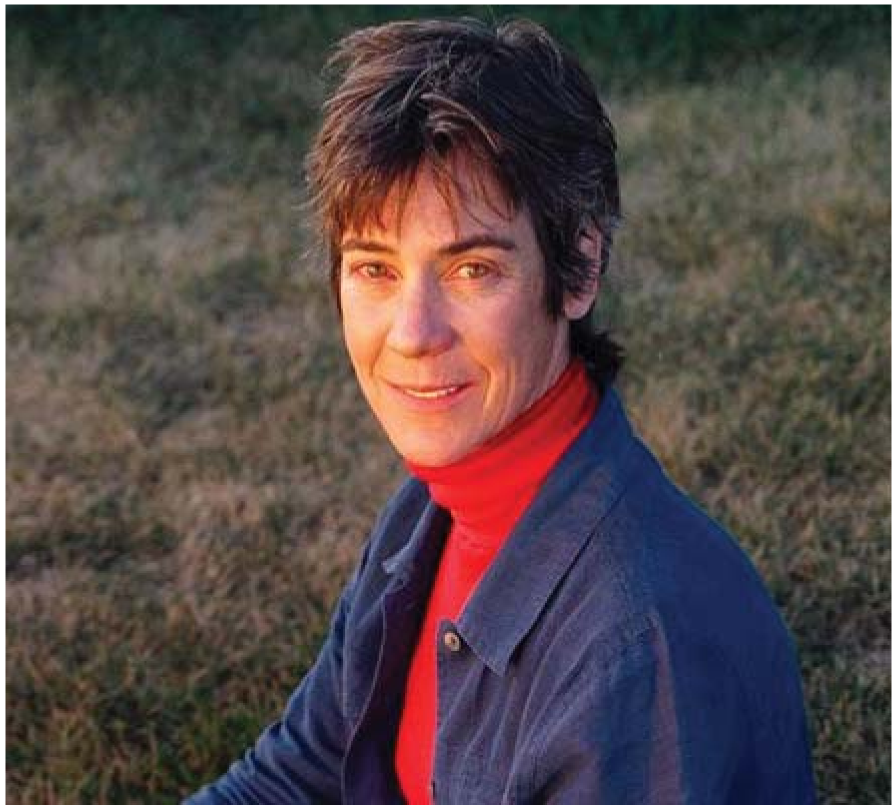
Ever since she first saw a grizzly bear while backpacking in Wyoming's Absaroka Mountains in the early 1970s, Louisa Willcox has been fascinated by them. Other than stints in outdoor education and journalism (including an internship at High Country News in 1979), Willcox has spent most of her professional life at the center of grizzly bear conservation in the Northern Rockies. While at the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, she organized a successful campaign to block a proposed gold mine next to Yellowstone National Park and was a lead advocate for halting clearcutting in grizzly habitat on the Targhee National Forest. In 2002 she became the Natural Resource Defense Council's senior wildlife advocate, and later aided the effort to get grizzly bears re-listed as a threatened species after the Bush administration removed them from the Endangered Species List in 2007. When federal funding for research on a key grizzly food source, whitebark pine, was delayed, jeopardizing the study, NRDC jump-started the work. The group paid for a series of airplane flights that revealed how much pine beetles had decimated the trees, showing that whitebark pine was functionally gone from most of the ecosystem. Recently, two of Willcox's pet goats were killed by mountain lions, an experience she says helps her continue to empathize with ranchers who lose sheep and cattle to predators. Willcox, now living in Livingston, Mont., recently retired from NRDC, and HCN caught up with her by phone.



HCN: Can you give a brief overview of grizzly conservation, both before and since 1975, when they were listed as a threatened species by the Endangered Species Act?

Willcox: Bears then were, and still are, at roughly one percent of the former numbers in about one to two percent of the former habitat. There were roughly 100,000 grizzly bears when Europeans first set foot on the continent. They were west of the Mississippi to the California coast, Canada and Alaska to Mexico. And in 1975, when they were listed, the scientific experts at the time were very fearful that grizzly bears would not survive. They were in a downward, sort of death spiral. And but for the ESA protections, they probably wouldn't be here today.

HCN: How did the ESA help grizzlies?

LW: What the ESA brought to bears was first was the halting of hunting. And that was because of low reproductive rates. You couldn't hunt 50 bears a year and have a stable population. The second thing that happened was that Yellowstone Park, which had been the center of conflicts with people, including a couple of fatalities, cleaned up what were open pit garbage dumps, and then they instituted a very strict program of bear-proof dumpsters in all the campgrounds and food storage poles in the backcountry. Over time, Yellowstone, which was the epicenter of dying bears, completely changed. And now bears hardly die at all in the park.

Another thing that happened was, under the ESA section seven requires federal oversight by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of any activity that could adversely affect grizzly bears. Several projects were mitigated or altered or stopped by virtue of this oversight provision. And then another thing that's hard to quantify is the prohibition against illegal killing of bears. There can be very, very high fines. And that probably had a positive impact against poaching.

HCN: What changes in attitudes towards grizzly bears have you seen in that time?

LW: I have always been impressed with the amount of respect and fondness for grizzly bears by people. Hunters and ranchers do not demonize bears. They're not monsters of God. I think one thing that has helped over the years is the consistent voice of government officials but also of scientists who have been out in the public arena talking about why bears are cool and what challenges and threats they still face. And I think people understand that.

HCN: But some people do oppose federal grizzly bear protection, arguing they should be managed by the states.

LW: Idaho, Montana and Wyoming are increasingly aggressive about trying to get the keys to the car of managing grizzly bears. The states have become a major force proposing delisting (removing grizzly bears from the endangered species list). Unlike other states that have broadened the funding base (for their wildlife departments), the three states around Yellowstone are largely driven by license fees. And hunter numbers are declining. But instead of figuring out how to broaden their base financially, to reflect changes in the demographics of the region, the states are really narrowing their focus and continuing to cater to hunters. You can take a look at what's going on with the gray wolf situation where the hunts have been very, very aggressive. If that occurs with grizzly bears, they are going to be in really deep trouble.

HCN: Last summer, then-Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar told Wyoming Governor Matt Mead that he would delist grizzlies by 2014. What are your other concerns about delisting?

LW: One of the really disturbing things over the current debate over delisting is that it appears as if the Interior Department has already made a decision to delist, even though there is current science underway relative to the impacts of the loss of whitebark pine (which grizzlies rely on for their fatty, high-protein seeds). Whitebark pine ended up being a centerpiece in the litigation that got the grizzly bear relisted in 2009. The federal government didn't even think about that in their 2007 delisting decision, but that turned into a pretty key piece of the two court rulings that said whitebark pine loss is a major threat to grizzly bears and you need to consider that before delisting. I believe that delisting is grossly premature. There are too many unknowns and too many threats that haven't been dealt with.

HCN: What is your level of faith that states would manage the grizzly bear population well after they're delisted?

LW: There would be a period of time, after delisting, for about five years or so where the federal government will be looking over the states' shoulders. But after that all bets are off.

And we're seeing more and more direct political interference with state and federal management by ultra-right-wing, highly mobilized groups, especially groups sponsored or supported by the National Rifle Association. We're seeing a radicalization of the Safari Club and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the creation of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, whose ideology is based on demonizing predators. And those forces were not around when I started this work. In the 1980s and 90s you could find bipartisan support for a variety of environmental problems, not just endangered species, but it's very, very hard to find that now, especially related to large carnivores.

HCN: How will government funding and staffing cuts affect grizzly conservation?

LW: Budget constraints are always an issue. And where I've seen it the most pronounced is one of the most important areas of conservation, and that is reducing conflicts (between grizzlies and hunters, ranchers and herders). Budget priorities are not in expanding the cadre of supportive conflict-reduction specialists that make a huge difference in whether the bears live or die. And then you compound that with direct political intervention in decision-making, like Governor Mead pressuring the Secretary of Interior, asking 'when are we going to get the de-listing,' that kind of thing. It creates an environment where those in state or federal agencies are always looking over their shoulder at what Congressional office is going to be on their case next. I really saw this increase with the Reagan administration and when James Watt was Secretary of the Interior. And the Clinton and Obama administrations have not reversed that trend.

HCN: You have said that agencies are "are perpetually us versus them — your forest, your park, your state, your county — rather than bringing people together. I've rarely seen any kind of useful coalition being formed by the agencies." Can you talk about that a little bit more?

LW: There is the superficial appearance of coordination. Here's an example. In the discussion of hunting bears after de-listing, one logical idea is to try to create a total ecosystem-wide cap on mortality, so that if Wyoming kills a bunch of bears, and if you've had a high level of human-caused mortalities in a year, then the next year you don't hunt bears in the whole ecosystem to try to make up for that. And the states would not agree to that. They don't want to be constrained by what other states are doing.

HCN: What's are the biggest challenges in grizzly conservation?

LW: I think a lot of the easy stuff in terms of grizzly bear conservation has been done. The low hanging fruit has been plucked, like garbage-related issues.

The harder efforts relate to habitat protection outside (Yellowstone), and connectivity. Yellowstone is an isolated population of grizzly bears, and it has lost a fair amount of genetic diversity since its isolation over 100 years ago. The agency's response to that is, let's just truck a bear in every 10 years. And our response to that is, that's not really recovery. So if you can connect bears to other populations, then you don't have to be bound to this artificial importation of bears every 10 years, which is expensive and might not work.

HCN: It seems like the groups with the most sway over government policy are the ones that are most vocal and have the most money to spend, right?

LW: Federal agencies are really ill-equipped to deal with a broad array of public interests. And because of that they tend to then answer to a very narrow set of public interests that's sort of biting them at the moment. For example, on the de-listing decision in 2007, 99.9% of the public said no, yet the federal government just barged ahead based on pressure from the states and a narrow set of the public: outfitters, ranchers, agriculture groups and energy interests.

This isn't just any landscape. This is the nation's first national park. And it's one of the last intact ecosystems in the lower 48 states, one of the last places that has grizzly bears in it, one of the last places where we can get it right. And there's been always a great deal of public interest in Yellowstone and what happens there. And yet there is not a system in place that really coherently and systematically tries to understand those different public values and respond to them in a proactive, productive way.

Interview conducted, condensed and edited for clarity by Emily Guerin, assistant online editor at High Country News.