

Common Myths Regarding Grizzly Bear Management

Myth: Hunting Will Prevent Conflicts Between Grizzly Bears and People

Several grizzly bear experts have recently affirmed that hunting does not prevent conflicts between people and bears, and that other strategies -- such as securing attractants that can lure grizzly bears into developed areas -- are more effective in preventing conflicts:

- Former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Chris Servheen, who served as the agency's Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator from 1981 to 2016, states that "[A] normal hunting season won't reduce conflicts. You're taking out just a few bears across large areas, and a lot of the bears you remove probably weren't causing problems. Hunting is too random to ensure the 'right' bears get shot."¹
- Provincial Large Carnivore Biologist for British Columbia Garth Mowat told the Montana Governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council (GBAC) in a presentation on conflict prevention in 2020 that hunting targets male bears in wilderness areas, which are rarely bears involved in conflicts with people. Since banning trophy hunting of grizzly bears in 2017, British Columbia has not seen an increase in conflicts, human deaths or attacks by grizzlies, or bears "overrunning" developed areas: "[T]he reality is, we never changed anything about how we manage human-grizzly bear conflict after they closed the hunt and we have had no crisis. In fact, I would say the way you manage conflict is different from the way you manage a hunt and they're not even the same bears most of the time...We did not change the conflict rules for our conservation officers."²
- Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has affirmed that hunting will not reduce conflicts between people and bears, noting to the GBAC in 2020 that "...[I]n the context of Montana grizzly bears, recreational hunting would probably be limited to such a small number of bears that behavioral effects at the population level would be unlikely...although a hunt specifically targeting nuisance bears is theoretically possible, it would be logistically difficult and raise ethical issues regarding fair chase."³
- Recognizing that scientific data do not support a link between hunting and conflict prevention, the GBAC noted in their final report that "...[H]unting is not likely to be an effective tool for conflict prevention or reduction."⁴

However, when Montana residents were asked about valid reasons for hunting grizzly bears, 46% agreed hunting should be used as a tool to reduce conflict, illustrating the clear need for more public education on why hunting does not prevent conflicts.

¹<https://www.themeateater.com/conservation/wildlife-management/would-hunting-grizzlies-reduce-conflict-with-humans>

² Mowat, G. April 9, 2020. Presentation on grizzly bear management and hunting in British Columbia. Montana Governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO0GNI_fRU

³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gfpINkzrbK2bf7ngdVDlesPy0TChFKyU/view>

⁴<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwpc/conservation/wildlife-reports/bears/gbac-report-digital-final--9-8-20.pdf>. P. 18.

A limitation of the survey is that other management options were not given as an alternative to the question: “Regulated hunting of grizzly bears should be used as a tool to reduce grizzly bear human conflict.” Survey takers could not select non-lethal options such as securing attractants near residences and developed areas, or use of range riders and guardian dogs -- common non-lethal measures to prevent livestock-grizzly bear conflicts (Moreira-Arce et al. 2018, Treves et al. 2016). Unfortunately, the survey question implies that hunting reduces conflicts, further increasing some Montanans’ misconceptions that hunting is a solution to human/bear conflicts.

Myth: Hunting Will Increase Grizzly Bears’ Fear of People

When asked if hunting would make grizzly bears more wary of humans, 39 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed, demonstrating a common belief perpetuated by segments of the hunting community and others that once grizzly bears are exposed to hunting, they will begin avoiding people and people will be safer from grizzly bear encounters.

However, there is essentially no evidence that a sport hunt instills fear in grizzlies or makes them warier of humans, and no evidence that people become safer if grizzlies are hunted. There are several reasons for this, as pointed out by retired U.S. Geological Survey biologist Dr. David Mattson, who has studied grizzly bear behavior and biology for decades⁵:

- Grizzly bears seem to be hard-wired genetically to deal with perceived threats aggressively, as they evolved in open environments where safety depended on standing their ground and intimidating or beating back any threat. (Smith et al. 2018)
- Grizzly bears are likely to seek out food regardless of whether they were hunted or not. Obtaining food is another hard-wired drive for bears, especially during the late summer and fall when they are putting on fat to get through hibernation. Hunting does not deal with the availability of foods near people, and we should not expect grizzlies will be less motivated to procure food because we are hunting them. Though a study from Scandinavia suggested that hunted European brown bears might be more wary and hunting increased their nighttime activity, this possible behavioral response was trumped by whether food was available near people.
- Research by Canadian behavioral ecologist Stephen Herrero, who has spent essentially his entire professional career looking at the immediate circumstances of bear attacks, shows that most attacks by grizzlies happened because people were moving quietly through the woods, resulting in surprise encounters, or because the bears were attracted to the vicinity of people by food. (Smith et al. 2018, Herrero et al. 1990) Surprise encounters and foods that attract grizzlies are prominent drivers of risk. Unless high numbers of bears are killed, the chances of substantially reducing the chance of surprise encounters is small. Hunting will not eliminate the hard-wired tendency for grizzlies to defend themselves from a perceived threat when surprised, especially when guarding cubs or food.
- Dozens of grizzly bears are already shot by humans every year (for example, by big game hunters in surprise encounters or in conflicts or by ranchers or other people in

⁵ <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/15/hunting-to-scare-grizzly-bears/>

defense of life or property) , especially in the Yellowstone region, yet there is no evidence that bears have become more afraid of people.

- In contrast to herding animals like deer and elk, grizzly bears are solitary for most of their lives. The killing of one bear by a hunter in a particular place does not teach any other random bear to fear people.

Myth: Firearms are as Effective as Bear Spray in Preventing Attacks and Injuries to People and Bears

Although considerable research shows that bear spray is more effective at preventing grizzly bear attacks and resulting injury to people and bears, Montanans' opinions were divided on the most effective tool. Nineteen percent believed a firearm was most effective, while 26% believed bear spray and firearms were equally effective, and 25% did not know. This clearly demonstrates the need for increased public education. Fortunately, almost all Montanans (94 percent) reported they had or would be willing to carry bear spray while recreating or hunting.

Knowing how to live, work and recreate in grizzly bear country, and how to use bear spray is more effective than firearms or hunting of grizzly bears. Having bear spray readily available and knowing how to use it drastically reduces the risk of injury or death during a grizzly bear encounter. Experts researching human-bear conflicts have consistently and uniformly concluded that "bear spray represents an effective alternative to lethal force" to ensure "personal safety for those recreating and working in bear country." Indeed, decades' worth of robust literature published by state and federal wildlife management professionals, veterinarians, and academic researchers has proven time and time again that bear spray works to keep both people and bears safe (Smith et al. 2018, Smith et al. 2008, Herrero and Higgins 1998).

A comprehensive study of every recorded incident where bear spray was used during close-range bear encounters in Alaska over a 20-year period (1996-2006) found that in 98% of cases, persons carrying bear spray walked away completely uninjured. And in the 2% of cases where bears did injure persons carrying bear spray, the injuries were minor and did not require hospitalization. A majority (74%) of the encounters examined in the study were with grizzly bears. The authors found that bear spray is "highly effective" at stopping undesirable behavior and aggression by grizzly bears, concluding that "...[p]ersons working and recreating in bear habitat should feel confident that they are safe if carrying bear spray," and recommending its use to "reduce the number of bears killed [by firearms] in defense-of-life" (Smith et al. 2018, Smith et al. 2008, Herrero and Higgins 1998).

References

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