

# Bear managers' credibility on the line

By Tom Mangelsen | Posted: Wednesday, November 19, 2014 4:30 am

American poet Robert Frost once expressed a sentiment that many of us feel in our hearts: “The world has room to make a bear feel free.”

How I wish it were true today in Wyoming, home to one of the most exceptional bear populations on the planet, including members of the grizzly family so closely identified with our valley.

Iconic grizzly 399 and her charismatic and peaceful family (including grandson 760) have inspired a nation and beyond. Just eight years ago the opportunity to observe bears in Grand Teton National Park made them the stars of a million memories. 399, 610, 760 and other offspring stepped out of the supporting role they played for the park and became the headliners.

Seeing the family was no longer incidental to a visit. Jackson Hole became the destination. Press releases, articles and controversial letters to the editor about the lives of the bears have long been a staple in the news. The British paper The Mail even reported Sunday on the birth of 399’s triplets and 610’s twins! So why is the information about the death of 760 so hollow, so vague and so unsatisfactory?

Since mid October the last weeks of bear 760’s life played out in the media, but accounts hardly portrayed an accurate or complete picture. Tight-lipped authorities combined with superficial media reporting have allowed hearsay and generalizations to abound. Much of it pins the blame on the bear when in fact it has been decisions by wildlife managers that warrant scrutiny.

If due diligence to discover the facts behind 760’s death has not been successful then we are left to make assumptions about the wisdom, the credibility and indeed the politics of his death.

760’s life cast a light on the lives of grizzly bears; his death can do the same for all those euthanized by permission of the federal grizzly bear recovery coordinator. 760’s alleged crime, resulting in a death sentence, is still not clear. And why was a sow also removed in Clark the very next day?

The entry on the mortality database is not consistent with the words of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department’s large carnivore supervisor, Dan Thompson, who said 760 was simply “too comfortable around people.” Dan stands by the decision to relocate 760 to an unfamiliar and possibly hostile environment just east of Yellowstone. Why was that decision made? Did Grand Teton refuse to find a place for him, possibly in his own northern home range? And what exactly constitutes habituation and a food reward?

Mike Ebinger is the lead of a study to find out if a gunshot is a dinner bell to a grizzly. He has already recorded that the scent of people is what the bears follow even before there is a gut pile from the

harvest. Hunters are silent, often alone — two things that the park instructs us not to do. They leave the same evidence of human scent that is found around the baited culvert traps of researchers. Is this not also habituation? Is this not a food reward courtesy of humans, just as the poorly hung deer was 760's "food reward" according to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team's mortality database?

Blame for habituation focuses solely on "viewers" and photographers, and it is time other causes of habituation are examined, especially since Ebinger has seen that it is the anticipation of a food reward that causes bears to follow hunters. Bears will find gut piles and carcasses. So what will the authorities do with this information?

The choice seems to be to either kill the bears (like 760) or kill the hunt. In Grand Teton National Park there can only be one answer.

And what about the ethical considerations of the repeated trapping of any bear?

A great example is 399, trapped at least six times (with little concern for her young, possibly left alone outside the trap in habitat where there could also be large boars and wolves) and collared twice. Just because the authorities can continue to do this does not mean that they should.

Transparency by the recovery team can allay our skepticism about its methods of removing bears. Until it shares all the records of relocated and euthanized bears, there will be suspicion and lack of confidence in the consistency and integrity of its decisions.

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee has made its goal to remove grizzlies from their already weak protection under the Endangered Species Act well known. Returning management to the states is being hastened by many a political agenda, the most repulsive being to allow trophy hunting of the great bear.

If that happens, say good-bye to special bears we have known, like 760 and quite possibly 399, and others whom our children, grandchildren and ourselves will never again have the joy or gift to see.