Inspired by Late Animal Actor "Bart the Bear" — Vital Ground Protects Grizzly Bear Habitat

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HIGHLY ACCLAIMED NATURAL HISTORY WRITER DOUG CHADWICK FIRST MET WITH DOUG SEUS, PERHAPS THE WORLD'S PREEMINENT BEAR TRAINER, WHILE CHADWICK WAS RESEARCHING AN ARTICLE FOR NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE ON GRIZZLY BEARS.

DOUG AND LYNNE SEUS

CHADWICK HAD SEEN A PHOTO OF SEUS RIDING ON THE BACK OF "BART THE BEAR." AND THEN HE JUST SHOWED UP ON SEUS' DOORSTEP ONE DAY IN 1984 TO TALK TO THE FAMOUS BEAR TRAINER. CHADWICK WAS EAGER TO GET SOME UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES ON WORKING CLOSELY WITH GRIZZLIES FROM SEUS. AT THE TIME, THE ANIMAL TRAINER'S PRIMARY SUBJECT WAS A 1500 LB KODIAK BROWN BEAR NAMED BART.

THE TWO DOUGS, WHO ARE NOW CLOSE FRIENDS, TRAVELED TOGETHER ON SAFARI IN EAST AFRICA IN 1989 WHERE CHADWICK WAS WORKING ON AN ELEPHANT STORY. DISCUSSION TURNED TO THE GREAT LANDSCAPE OF COLONIAL AMERICA, AS THE TWO PEERED OUT OVER THE MASAI MARA. IN AWE OF WILDEBEESTS AND THE OTHER MIGRATORY UNGULATES ON THE AFRICAN PLAINS, THEY CONTEMPLATED AN AMERICA WHEN BUFFALO STILL ROAMED THE WEST AND CALIFORNIA HAD GRIZZLY BEARS. AND THEY THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT THEY COULD DO TO RESTORE LARGER AREAS WHERE AMERICA'S PANOPLY OF GREAT NATIVE CREATURES DOMINATED THE LANDSCAPE.

DOUG CHADWICK

CONCERNED OVER THE STATUS OF THE POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY1000 BEARS OR FEWER LEFT IN THE LOWER 48 IN MID-80S, CHADWICK AND SEUS BOTH AGREED THAT A SUPPLEMENTAL APPROACH TO PROTECT THE ICONIC CARNIVORE WAS WARRANTED, ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THE POPULATION DID NOT APPEAR TO BE RECOVERING VERY STRONGLY FROM ITS LOW POINT. TRADITIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN OF LIMITED EFFECTIVENESS FOR SUCH A WIDE-RANGING SPECIES. EVEN THOUGH THE POPULATION HAS BEEN ON THE REBOUND WITH CURRENT NUMBERS ESTIMATED TO BE AROUND 1600 ANIMALS, THE GRIZZLY IS STILL RELEGATED TO LIVING ON LAND COMPRISED OF ONLY TWO PERCENT OF ITS HISTORIC RANGE IN THE CONTIGUOUS UNITED STATES.

IN AN INCREASINGLY CROWDED AND URBANIZED WORLD, THERE ARE LIMITATIONS TO WHAT EXISTING PROTECTION CAN OFFER SUCH A WIDE-RANGING CARNIVORE SPECIES. THE GRIZZLY HAS BEEN LISTED AS "THREATENED" IN THE LOWER 48 SINCE 1975. SO IN 1990 THEY LAUNCHED VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION. WILDLIFE ECOLOGISTS, TEND TO STUDY THE MEASURABLE INDICATORS THAT INDIRECTLY TELL US WHAT A BEAR DOES FOR A LIVING AND HOW BEARS ARE DISTRIBUTED ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE. THESE BAROMETERS ALSO TELL US HOW A CONSERVATION-SENSITIVE SPECIES IS DOING UNDER PROTECTION.

THUS FAR BEAR BIOLOGISTS HAVE DONE AN EXEMPLARY JOB. I CONTEND, HOWEVER, THAT THEIR JOB IS MORE OFTEN ABOUT LEARNING TO KNOW ABOUT THE NATURAL HISTORY OF BEARS, AND SPECIFICALLY THEIR POPULATION ECOLOGY. THEY ARE NOT NECESSARILY TASKED WITH LEARNING INDIVIDUAL BEARS ON AN INTIMATE LEVEL AS THE TWO DOUGS HAVE COME TO KNOW THEM. ONE WAY TO KNOW A BEAR SO INTIMATELY IS TO RAISE ONE. ANOTHER

WAY IS TO LIVE AMONG THEM, WHICH IS NOT USUALLY RECOMMENDED. ANOTHER WAY IS TO OBSERVE THEM IN NATURE AS A PASTIME, WHICH IS WHAT CHADWICK HAS DONE A LOT OF OVER THE YEARS.

ALTHOUGH CHADWICK HAS HAD A WILD GRIZZLY BRUSH UP AGAINST HIM, HE HAS NOT LIVED WITH BEARS. AS ONE OF AMERICA'S ESTEEMED NATURE WRITERS LIVING IN MONTANA, HE HAS REALLY GOTTEN TO KNOW BEARS IN NATURE. CHADWICK HAS LOGGED HUNDREDS, IF NOT THOUSANDS OF HOURS, OBSERVING BROWN BEARS IN MONTANA, ALASKA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, AND CENTRAL ASIA.

BIOLOGISTS OFTEN LOOK AT HABITAT SUITABILITY, AND IN AREAS WHERE HABITAT RESTORATION CAN BENEFIT WILDLIFE, RESTORATION IS ONE MEASURE CONSIDERED. THEIR ASSESSMENTS ALONE HELP IMMENSELY IN INSTRUCTING POLICY MAKERS AND OTHERS IN THE CONSERVATION ARENA ON HOW TO MAKE DECISIONS REGARDING THE PRESERVATION AND PROTECTION OF HABITAT OR WHAT IS LEFT OF IT. AND THESE BIOLOGISTS HAVE CONTRIBUTED MUCH TO WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT BEARS AND WHAT THEY NEED TO SURVIVE.

IN FACT, BIOLOGISTS HAVE DONE A REMARKABLE JOB LEARNING ABOUT BEARS AND THE NEEDS OF BEARS SUCH THAT REMOVAL OF THE YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM'S GRIZZLY BEAR POPULATION, THE SOUTHERN MOST POPULATION OF GRIZZLY BEARS, FROM THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT'S LIST OF THREATENED AND PROTECTED SPECIES WAS RECENTLY ISSUED FOLLOWING A REQUEST BY THE USFWS. AND IN MAY 2007 THE POPULATION WAS DELISTED. FOLLOWING MUCH PUBLIC OUTCRY FROM ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT LITIGATION, THE GRIZZLY WAS REINSTATED AS A "THREATENED" SPECIES IN 2009. THE YELLOWSTONE AREA POPULATION IS NOW ESTIMATED TO BE ABOUT 700 BEARS AND IT IS AGAIN UNDER FEDERAL PROTECTION.

SO ALMOST THREE DECADES AGO, DOUG AND HIS WIFE, LYNNE, AND CHADWICK BEGAN THINKING OF OUR NATURAL HERITAGE AS IT ONCE FLOURISHED ACROSS THE PLAINS AND MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPES OF THE GREAT WEST, AND BEGAN TO ENVISION A FUTURE FOR THE GRIZZLY HERE IN THE LOWER 48. THE BRUINS CURRENTLY HAVE A LIMITED RANGE IN THREE STATES (MT, ID, AND WY), PLUS AN OCCASIONAL TRANSIENT FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA IN WASHINGTON'S NORTH CASCADES.

VITAL GROUND

AWARE THAT THE GRIZZLY'S FUTURE AS IT STILL REMAINS TODAY IS QUITE UNCERTAIN, DOUG AND LYNNE SEUS DECIDED TO BUY SOME PROPERTY IN MONTANA—HABIT DEEMED NOT JUST APPROPRIATE AND SUITABLE, BUT CONSIDERED PRIME HABITAT FOR GRIZZLY BEARS. THEY PURCHASED 240 ACRES OF WILD LAND ADJOINING PROTECTED LAND IN PINE BUTTE PRESERVE ALONG MONTANA'S EASTERN FRONT OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS. CHADWICK WAS ALREADY LIVING IN THE "HEART" OF MONTANA'S BEAR COUNTRY. AS I SUGGESTED, ONE THING LEAD TO ANOTHER AND THE TWO LAUNCHED VITAL GROUND AS A LAND TRUST DEDICATED TO PROTECTING GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT FOR THE ICONIC UMBRELLA SPECIES.

NOW, BASED IN MISSOULA, MONTANA, VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION HAS PURCHASED OVER 600,000 ACRES OF PRIVATE LANDS. THE ORGANIZATION "WORKS COOPERATIVELY WITH LANDOWNERS, LOCAL COMMUNITIES, AND STATE AND FEDERAL AGENCIES TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF HABITAT FRAGMENTATION BY

PERMANENTLY PROTECTING CRUCIAL LANDS [FOR NOT ONLY GRIZZLY BEARS],” BUT [ALSO] OTHER WIDE-RANGING WILDLIFE WHICH UTILIZE GRIZZLY HABITAT.

Photo: Jamie Scarrow

I SHOULD STATE THAT VITAL GROUND IS NOT INTERESTED IN TAKING LAND FROM PEOPLE FOR THE SAKE OF SALVAGING HABITAT FOR GRIZZLY BEARS. WHAT THEY ARE INTERESTED IN DOING IS REWARDING PEOPLE FOR MAKING THEIR LAND ACCESSIBLE AND PERMEABLE TO WILDLIFE. THESE PRACTICES ARE OFTEN CONSISTENT WITH WHAT PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GRIZZLY COUNTRY ARE ALREADY LOOKING FOR—A PLACE TO LIVE IN PROXIMITY TO RAW AND RELATIVELY UNDISTURBED NATURE.

IN ADDITION, BY NEGOTIATING WITH LANDOWNERS WITH PROPERTY ADJOINING PUBLIC LANDS LIKE NATIONAL FORESTS, VITAL GROUND HELPS COMMUNITIES NOT ONLY INCREASE THE VALUE OF PRIVATE LAND, BUT THEY HELP AUGMENT THE LAND ALREADY SET ASIDE FOR WILDLIFE, MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR ANIMAL POPULATIONS TO SAFELY MOVE FROM ONE PROTECTED AREA TO ANOTHER.

THROUGH CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAMS VITAL GROUND PAYS PEOPLE TO ACCOMMODATE THE MOVEMENT OF WILDLIFE ON THEIR PROPERTY. “IN SOME CASES,” SAYS CHADWICK, “VITAL GROUND PAYS PEOPLE TO “KEEP DOING THE RIGHT THING ON THEIR OWN LAND FOR THE BENEFIT OF WILDLIFE.” THIS MAY INCLUDE IMPLEMENTING SEASONAL MANAGEMENT OF LIVESTOCK OR CONTINUING WITH PRACTICES THAT ACCOMMODATES THE MOVEMENT OF BEARS. IN ADDITION, THEY HAVE WORKED WITH MANY PARTNERS IN ACCRUING THE 600,000 PLUS ACRES FOR GRIZZLIES, INCLUDING, YELLOWSTONE TO YUKON CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS, THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND, FIVE VALLEYS LAND TRUST, WILLIAM H. DONNER FOUNDATION, AND THE METABOLIC STUDIO. THEY HAVE ALSO WORKED TO RETIRE GRAZING ALLOTMENTS, RECOVERING SUCH PROPERTY FOR WILDLIFE. SUCH LAND WAS ONCE FEDERAL PROTECTED WILDERNESS AND IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION, VITAL GROUND HAS RESTORED IT FOR BEARS AND OTHER MAJESTIC NORTH AMERICAN FAUNA.

VITAL GROUND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR GARY WOLFE HAS OFTEN ALLUDED TO THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDLIFE LINKAGE ON THE LANDSCAPE AND THE NEED TO PROTECT PRIVATE LANDS TO HELP SUPPORT THE MOVEMENTS OF ONE OF THE WORLD’S TWO LARGEST TERRESTRIAL CARNIVORE SPECIES.

“FROM HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS TO COMMERCIAL SITES, FROM ROADS TO RAILROADS, GRIZZLIES AND OTHER WILDLIFE FACE NUMEROUS HUMAN BARRIERS,” HE HAS SAID. “WHEN CONTIGUOUS BLOCKS OF HABITAT ARE BROKEN INTO PIECES FROM HUMAN ACTIVITIES, THE RESULT IS HABITAT FRAGMENTATION.”

Photo: Philip DeManczuk

DOUG CHADWICK INDICATED THAT FROM THE BEGINNING HE SAW BENEFIT TO PROTECTING AS MUCH PRIVATE LAND NEAR EXISTING CORE HABITAT OR LINKAGE AREAS AS POSSIBLE, ESPECIALLY WHEN THE SURROUNDING AREA IS LARGELY PRIVATE, LAND. THIS IS BECAUSE BEARS AND OTHER WILDLIFE SPECIES MAY SELECT DIFFERENT HABITAT TO MOVE ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE THAN THE TYPE OF HABITAT THAT THEY CHOOSE FOR OTHER PURPOSES. ALTHOUGH

SOME PUBLIC LAND HAS BEEN PROTECTED BECAUSE OF THE SUITABLE SPECIES-APPROPRIATE HABITAT IT OFFERS, IT MAY NOT OFFER HABITAT THAT BEARS PREFER TO USE WHEN CROSSING OR TRANSITIONING AMONG DIFFERENT LANDSCAPES.

AS AN EXAMPLE, IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES VITAL GROUND " IS WORKING WITH BIOLOGISTS TO IDENTIFY, WHERE GRIZZLY/WILDLIFE MOVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES STILL EXIST AND IS TRYING TO PROTECT THESE POTENTIAL LINKAGE AREAS. USING VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION EASEMENTS OR BY ACQUIRING THE PROPERTY FROM WILLING SELLERS."

ACCORDING TO A VITAL GROUND DIRECTOR OF LANDS RYAN LUTEY, "THESE CORRIDORS WILL HELP RESTORE AND MAINTAIN THE HABITAT CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN THE LARGE BLOCKS OF PUBLIC LAND IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES REGION, AND FOSTER WILDLIFE MOVEMENTS BETWEEN ECOSYSTEMS ACROSS A PERMEABLE LANDSCAPE. INTACT LINKAGE AREAS ALLOW GRIZZLIES AND OTHER WILDLIFE TO DISPERSE TO NEW RANGES AND EXCHANGE GENES BETWEEN POPULATIONS."

IN A RECENT POST, I MENTION SOME OTHER CURRENT WORK VITAL GROUND IS SUPPORTING IN AND NEAR ONE OF THE FIVE ECOSYSTEMS WHERE GRIZZLY BEARS EXIST ON PUBLIC LANDS (UNDER FEDERAL PROTECTION) AND WHERE APPLIED CONSERVATION EFFORTS FOR THE GRIZZLY CONTINUE IN HOPES OF INCREASING LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE RESPECTIVE POPULATIONS IN THESE FOUR ECOSYSTEMS; THE NORTH CASCADES DOES NOT HAVE RESIDENT GRIZZLY BEARS IN EXISTENCE, NOR DOES THE SELWAY-BITTERROOT/CENTRAL IDAHO ECOSYSTEM.

I RESPECT MY COLLEAGUES, NATURALISTS AND BIOLOGISTS ALIKE, AND I DEFER TO MANY OF THEM ALL THE TIME FOR DIFFERENT REASONS, BUT I WANTED TO HEAR WHAT SUES AND CHADWICK HAVE TO SAY NOT ONLY AS FOUNDING BOARD MEMBERS OF VITAL GROUND, BUT AS TWO PASSIONATE GUYS WHO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT GRIZZLY HABITAT AND DEFINITELY KNOW GRIZZLY BEARS.

WHEN A BIOLOGIST MEETS A BEAR IN THE WILD THE INTERACTION CAN BE INTENSE AND USUALLY SOMEWHAT STRESSFUL, AT LEAST FOR THE BEAR AND SOMETIMES EVEN FOR THE BEAR BIOLOGIST. IF A BEAR, FOR EXAMPLE, IS DISCOVERED IN A TRAP AND THEN TRANQUILIZED, FROM THE BEAR'S PERSPECTIVE, IT IS PROBABLY NOT HAVING A GOOD DAY. TODAY, BIOLOGISTS SPEND EVEN LESS TIME IN THE WILD TRACKING AND TRAPPING BEARS, BECAUSE TECHNOLOGY AND MORE INNOVATIVE, LESS INVASIVE METHODS OF LEARNING ABOUT BEARS HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE.

CHADWICK AND SEUSS ARE NOT TECHNICALLY BEAR BIOLOGISTS, ALTHOUGH CHADWICK WAS TRAINED AS A WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST, BUT THEY KNOW GRIZZLY BEARS AND BEAR BEHAVIOR ON AN INTIMATE LEVEL, AS I'VE MENTIONED. CHADWICK, WHO LIVES IN WHITEFISH, MONTANA NEAR GLACIER NATIONAL PARK KNOWS MONTANA'S GRIZZLIES PARTICULARLY WELL. AS A NATURE WRITER CHADWICK COMMUNICATES WILDLIFE SCIENCE AND ECOLOGY IN AN ACCESSIBLE WAY THAT MUST BE PALATABLE TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

ONE CAN INFORMALLY OBSERVE BEARS IN THE WILD. AND SOME HAVE TRIED TO LIVE AMONG WILD BEARS. SOME HAVE DONE IT IRRESPONSIBLY AND A FEW EVEN LOST THEIR LIVES TRYING TO LIVE WITH BEARS. OTHERS, PERHAPS MORE COGNIZANT OF THE RISKS HAVE TAUGHT US A LOT ABOUT BEARS AND GOT TO KNOW BEARS. SOME HAD PHDS AND SOME HAD GEDS.

BUT, IN MY OPINION THERE IS NOTHING LIKE RAISING A GRIZZLY BEAR AND TREATING IT LIKE FAMILY. I DON'T MEAN

BRINGING A 1200-POUND BROWN BEAR INTO THE KITCHEN OR DRESSING IT LIKE SOME HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO DRESS PERFORMING GREAT APES OR DOING ANYTHING OF THE KIND. I MEAN DEVELOPING THAT EXTRAORDINARY BOND, THAT MOST INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLANET'S LARGEST TERRESTRIAL CARNIVORE.

THIS IS WHAT DOUG SEUSS DID WITH THE SUPPORT OF HIS WIFE LYNNE. HE RAISED THE FEATURE FILM SENSATION, A 9'2, 1500 LB KODIAK BROWN BEAR NAMED BART. BART WAS BORN TO A KODIAK BEAR IN A ZOO. DOUG AND LYNNE OFFERED TO RAISE THE CUB THEMSELVES ON THEIR OWN AT THEIR HOME AND ANIMAL TRAINING FACILITY-WASATCH ROCKY MOUNTAIN WILDLIFE, INC. IN UTAH.

AS LYNNE SAID, "FROM THE TIME WE GOT HIM IN 1977, AND UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 2000, BART WAS A TRULY MAGICAL ANIMAL. AND HIS FILM CAREER TOOK US ON MANY GRAND ADVENTURE—FROM THE MAJESTIC PEAKS OF THE AUSTRIAN ALPS AND THE ALASKA