The Iconic Grizzly Bear Returns

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Acclaimed photographer Tom Mangelsen and noted journalist Todd Wilkinson just released the book Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek , which is a memoir of sorts of one of the most famous grizzly bears in the Lower 48. Her name is 399 and she is a star among bears.

Bear 399 was first fitted with a tracking collar back in 2001, as a 5-year-old sow living in Grand Teton National Park. Studies of 399 and her cubs' movements and interactions with people near Jackson Hole have recently enlightened researchers about the behavior of habituated bears, not to be confused with food conditioned bears.

Pioneering radio telemetry studies were conducted by the Craigheads in the late 1950's, when they researched the behavior and ecology of the grizzly bears of Yellowstone. Although the technology is now more sophisticated with the advent of GPS collars, conceptually the telemetric study of bears and other carnivores as they move across the landscape remains fundamentally the same. The collar emits a signal, which enables researchers to remotely monitor the movements of wildlife and their use of habitat.

In her 19 years, 399 has produced 15 cubs and her legacy will be continued by her surviving offspring. Bear 399 has garnered an immense amount of media attention around the world and has turned Jackson Hole into a mecca for bear viewing. Most importantly, bear 399 is a testament to bear conservation management programs adopted in the contiguous US.

Grizzlies, which are North America's version of the brown bear have made an astonishing comeback from the mid-1970's when they were federally listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Although they must endure emerging threats from the likes of climate change, humans continue to pose the biggest threat through more direct influences.

Rebounding grizzly populations in the Lower 48 translate into more than just the restoration of a wildlife icon. The presence of grizzlies speaks to the health of ecosystems. Grizzlies are both umbrella and keystone species. Conserving these majestic mammals serves to facilitate preservation efforts for a multitude of other species that also occur in habitats where grizzly bears exist.

As eminent ecologist David Suzuki said, "Scientists believe that grizzly bears are an essential part of healthy, fully functioning ecosystems in western North America. Known as a "keystone" species, grizzlies are "ecosystem engineers" that help to regulate prey species and disperse the seeds of many plant species, such as blueberry and buffaloberry. They also help to maintain plant and forest health, both by aerating the soil as they dig for roots, pine nuts and ground squirrels, and by moving thousands of kilograms of spawning salmon carcasses into the forest, where trees and other plants absorb their high levels of nitrogen."

According to the IUCN Red List, the world's most comprehensive database on the conservation status of imperiled species, the total population of brown bears on Earth exceeds 200,000 individuals. Indeed, there are healthy and rebounding populations of brown bears around the world, with strongholds persisting in Russia, Canada and Alaska. Some of these populations are in decline, as a consequence of human-induced stressors like poaching, and encroachment and development of habitat. In addition, climate change and rapid human population growth continue to place pressure on these robust carnivores, which rival the polar bear as the largest terrestrial carnivore on the planet.

The brown bear is regionally extinct in Mexico and in Northern and Central Europe and in parts of Africa and Asia where it once flourished as an opportunistic omnivore and apex predator. Many of these regions on the planet will never be restored with brown bears, as habitat is not available nor is it suitable for reintroduction efforts. But as I mentioned in a recent article , some European brown bear populations are also making a

comeback. This strongly suggests that human-brown bear coexistence is possible even in human-dominated landscapes. While some populations remain critically endangered, albeit stable (neither decreasing or increasing in numbers), others are actually increasing in size.

Critically endangered populations of brown bears face a high risk of extinction by definition. They are exceedingly vulnerable merely because their numbers are so low that they are susceptible to stochastic events. Lower reproductive rates and higher mortality rates in these small populations dictate that these bears receive as much protection as possible by wildlife management agencies. This is one reason that although grizzly bear recovery efforts have been deemed successful in restoring the North American brown bear to parts of their historic range in the Lower 48, efforts to delist the grizzly remain controversial and continue to be challenged by some in the conservation community.

The regionally “endangered” populations in both the contiguous US and Western Europe total under 20,000 bears with under 2,000 in the Lower 48 . Increasing development continues to threaten the 45-50 grizzly bears that inhabit the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem and other recovery zones in the Western US.

The Vital Ground Foundation is working to safeguard this population and bears in other recovery zones. The Montana-based land trust has launched an initiative to secure unprotected private land in the region so that bears can move undisturbed from protected public lands via linkage zones. The nonprofit conservation entity secures these properties through fee title acquisitions and conservation easements.

Vital Ground’s Executive Director Ryan Lutey provides a status report on grizzly bears in the Lower 48 for this year.

“During 2015, unusually warm, dry weather throughout western Montana and North Idaho diminished the availability of natural foods for bears, which has resulted in a dramatic increase in conflicts between bears and humans. Bears are being forced to roam farther in search of a meal, which offers many more opportunities for wandering bears to be hit crossing a highway or relocated or removed as part of a wildlife management action to mitigate a conflict. For a population as tenuous as the one in and around the Cabinet-Yaak, every single grizzly mortality carries implications for long-term recovery. and that’s why preventing additional human intrusion into wildlife habitat is so important. Collaborative approaches like helping private landowners tap into tax incentives associated with conservation easements protects wildlife habitat from inappropriate subdivision and development and helps make these teetering grizzly populations more resilient to both acute seasonal events and to the extended effects of climate change.”

In North America alone, there are nearly 58,000 brown bears (AKA grizzly bears). Most of these iconic mammals live in mountainous regions of Alaska and Western Canada. The recovery of the grizzly bear in the Lower 48 is an important restoration effort beyond just the conservation of one well-known and beloved species. Securing the future of these bears may be our most significant contribution to the conservation of North America’s natural heritage.