Wildlife management – an ongoing debate

By Jon Beckmann, National Geographic

In the original poem-turned-song “Home on the Range”, Dr. Brewster Higley affectionately recalled building his Kansas cabin in a place he shared with buffalo, deer, and antelope. Notably absent from his poem are the other species of large mega-fauna that at one time called his region home, including grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, and mountain lions.



Bears in neighborhoods are common in Lake Tahoe. Photo/Judy Brown.

When Higley wrote his popular ballad in the late 1800s, most of these species were gone, and by the early 1900s species such as grizzly bears and wolves were absent from more than 90 percent of their original range. However, over the last 40-50 years large carnivores have slowly begun to reclaim both their range and their numbers in the United States and across North America.

This recovery is a conservation success for these species, but it presents new challenges for people living with them, particularly in many western states.

Since the mid-1990s I have worked in the Lake Tahoe Basin in Nevada. Using historical records, several colleagues and I recently published a paper confirming that black bears were present throughout the state until about 1931, despite the fact that Nevada has not previously been recognized in the historical distribution maps for black bears in North America.

The lack of historical references after 1931 suggests that black bears were extirpated from Nevada's interior mountain ranges by then. While over-hunting and conflicts with domestic livestock contributed to the bear's local extinction in the Great Basin, the clear-cutting of forests throughout western and central Nevada for timber used in mining played a key role as well.

Two primary factors have led to bears' return back to parts of Nevada. First, as fossil fuels replaced timber as a heat and energy source and as forestry and grazing practices evolved, habitat regeneration occurred in the bears' former range in the Great Basin. Second, an investment in bear-proof garbage cans and dumpsters has lowered mortality rates of bears stemming from conflicts with people.

From the late 1990s to 2008 the Nevada population of black bears grew at an average annual rate of 16 percent. One result is that bears have been deemed fair game for hunters. In fact, the data we collected with the Nevada Department of Wildlife documenting growing bear numbers was the basis for the Nevada Board of Wildlife Commissioners' decision to approve the state's first-ever bear hunt in 2011.

The new hunt, which allows the killing of 20 bears in a year, set off a fierce debate in Nevada over how the state wildlife agency would manage recovering populations of large carnivores. Concerns included the role of hunting in management plans and determining which communities in the state were comfortable having recovered bear populations nearby.

All stakeholders – from hunters and ranchers to the larger agricultural community and environmentalists/wildlife preservationists – must determine together how we manage and live with these species. The recovery success of bears in Nevada could inform efforts with grizzlies and wolves in places like Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana – or mountain lions as they begin to recover in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and perhaps even Higley's home state of Kansas.

A complete hunting ban on grizzly bears and wolves, both no longer protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act due to population recovery, is doomed to fail and disenfranchises hunters, who have contributed much to conservation during the last century. More useful is finding a consensus on the number and distribution of large carnivores we hope to sustain.

Hunting regulations can then be formulated and adjusted to reach mutually recognized goals. Communities will need to grapple with how to live with big predators rather than simply whether or not to hunt them. Clear definitions will likely be needed of where large carnivores should never occur in a given landscape, something that has been poorly done if at all previously.

Hunting of large carnivores must be done under sound monitoring, not simply to remove animals that kill big game species or livestock. If done sustainably, we need not fear that these predators will slide back onto threatened species lists. And as they begin to recover, it will be up to each community and state to decide whether their songs and poems will express longing for a home where, like deer and antelope, bears get their chance to play.

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