The future of grizzly bears is a bitterly divisive topic, and rightly so.

In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, some 35,000 square miles spanning Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, bears have recovered from a crisis level of roughly 136 reached in the 1970s, to a healthy population of over 700. The federal protections of the Endangered Species Act have worked. The scientific community is divided though; some believe the grizzly is ready to be "delisted" — managed once again by states — and others believe more work needs to be done. Yet the heated question remains: Should the grizzly bear be delisted in the lower 48, and if so, should states allow them to be hunted?

Last year, Wyoming proposed a 23-tag public hunt, and the ensuing litigation from anti-hunt interest groups has arrested the entire delisting process. No court has ruled on the legitimacy of grizzly hunting directly, though. The public debate on it seems more intense, intractable and vitriolic than ever — but it does raise essential questions.

Can predator hunting be accepted by an evolving American society?

And whose human opinion should reign over the management of wildernesses?

Is killing an animal without the intention of eating it morally sound?

What is the vision of human-animal coexistence that we should strive for?

What are the emotions driving each side of the hunting debate?

Our decisions about grizzlies bring us to a justified moment of socio-cultural reckoning. To dive underneath the fierce rhetoric of the debate, I sat down with four passionate conservationists to talk deeply about the real subjects of the issue — bears.

Jack Evans

Writing has led Jack Evans to years of outfitting in Tanzania and Zambia, conservation efforts in the American West, and academic studies in human-animal anthropology in Scotland and South Africa. He is also the Editor and Director of Publications at Bear Trust International.

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I'm not anti-hunting, I grow up hunting. But at some point along the way, something changed in me. It's relatively easy to kill something, especially with a gun. But to keep a black bear alive, from the day he's born to the day he dies, to ensure that one black bear is able to survive without lethal threats and live a good life — that's a lot of work! And to do that for a whole population of black bears? To do it for all the bears in the world? Who in the human world is that committed? It's really difficult to take on that responsibility for wildlife, and most people don't want to do that amount of work.

And I'm not saying that killing is necessarily evil or wrong — we're part of a natural system where species' killing and eating of each other is all part of the cycle and flow of things. I would never say that all hunting should be stopped, or all killing. That's part of life on Earth. But to me, doing what it takes to survive and taking on responsibility in a really moral way as very different, very distinct paths. And it is more difficult to relate to something compassionately than consumptively.

One of the teachings of Buddhism is that you have to come with compassion for everything — not just for your fellow man, but compassion is a mentor for all life. And part of compassion is a real deep and profound understanding of equality between beings — whether they're other humans or Bengal tigers or piranhas. But a compassionate connection is kind of a threat to our ego. If our species primarily has that conditioned, we're quick to react harshly. We lose all logic and reach for that first wildlife management tool: kill! If you're compassionate, you have to be willing to step back — you can't just be a controller. You have to be accepting, and allow and assist in the day to day.

I was very involved in a conservation effort in Mongolia to try to have a strongly endangered bear, the Gobi bear, live in the wild. I found the Mongolian's Buddhist culture to be truly fascinating that, along with the other things. When I looked in, there was a lot of work, but we rarely take a step back and look at the big picture.

A. C. "Charles" Smid

As I matured as a hunter, I began to develop that spiritual connection with nature. What finally "clicked" for me was a desire to be able to pass it on to future generations of hunters.

Charles is the founder and chair of the Bozeman-based nonprofit Bear Trust International. Though he's been deeply involved in philanthropic conservation initiatives for decades now, Charles' conservation interests are ever evolving. He created Bear Trust in 1999 in an effort to encourage positive human-bear coexistence, with a focus on pioneering youth education and mentorship programs.

Hunting has a unique education value for individuals. I was a conservationist when I first started to hunt! So, I didn't think most people were I was a gatherer. I was just outside of college and I had a wife and three kids, so I needed to gather food. But also I had a deep appreciation for wildlife as a Fair Chase hunter. I think after you've been in the field and you start to understand the spiritual connection with the animals — whether you are successful or not — you understand the beauty of Mother Nature and you feel the ongoing relationship that you're developing at a soul level.

Since I started occasionally archery hunting for bears, I was around 20 years old. I've had a lot of encounters with them. But I've never harvested a bear. There were opportunities, but I've never sworn my heart as a trophy. And every time it just didn't feel right. That's a final choice you make when you're hunting — whether you press the trigger or not. In the moment, you can feel an intuition, whether it's right or wrong. And you learn that if it doesn't feel right, you don't do it.

It's difficult to explain the distinctions that come out of a spiritual connection with nature — you've got to go out and experience it to understand. Then it leads to an 'aha!' moment, about realizing your part in a bigger ecosystem. "Now I get it." And you grow up over time, deepening that relationship and appreciation. Eventually you realize: "I want to be able to give back." What starts as hunting for the pot or maybe just the interest in it slowly becomes part of a greater appreciation. There's a maturation process.

As I got older, I joined groups like the Wild Sheep Foundation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, really just to help them. I was introduced to a regular member of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1991. And on one of that Spring, I was on a hunt with the Club's Teddy Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in Montana. I was a hike, looking for black bears and glassing the slopes covered in snow. It was a bitterly cold morning. We split in the distance I saw a string of horses, and a few people dressed in white and blue and orange.

They were grizzly hunters. And they were the last ones. Montana was closing its hunting season, to do with the federal protections on the grizzly bear.

I was seeing this whole thing go before my eyes. And I'm thinking: 'Something's wrong with this.' How can we as people not figure out a way to balance the needs of wildlife with the needs of humans — the need for proper habitat and sustainability for both?'

I formed Bear Trust International after realizing that this was what was lacking, and this was what I wanted to be able to do. It became clear that there was no other viable fundraising for bears at that time. And it's been a hell of a lot of work, but it's put it together, and now we're growing faster than ever!

What's so important to me with Bear Trust is that we're able to do our free conservation education lesson plans for kids for the future leaders of our world. And it's really important detail about the lessons is that they don't provide kids with single answers. Instead, the students work in teams to determine the viability of a management strategy on their own. The creative process is the key. They work together to make their decision based on factual scientific data, not on the human emotion that a lot of these decisions are based on. It's meant to be a simulation of cooperation, which we could use a lot more of in the real world. The most important thing about this is a byproduct effect that we are nurturing our future leaders to understand the value of conservation through education.

Hunting is education too. There's so much gained through the knowledge of the wild — whether it's learned through a mentor or on your own when you're in the field. You also learn from the social connections and inspirations of other hunters. Whether the individual, hunting plays a part in understanding the spiritual connection with the outside world. Hopefully it is a positive effect, like when I realized that I needed to take my experience and do what we do need cooperation in order to coexist with wildlife. Hopefully it is a positive effect, like when I realized that I needed to put a greater appreciation, we don't need to get involved in the world. Hopefully it is a positive effect, like when I realized that I needed to put a greater appreciation, we don't need to get involved in the world. Hopefully it is a positive effect, like when I realized that I needed to put a greater appreciation, we don't need to get involved in the world.
days, that big predators should be greatly curtailed if not eliminated—defending the interests of wool-growers and stock-growers and the protection of herds.

When I was the Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the grizzly issue was certainly simmering. I said that we really needed to be looking at the delisting; just to discuss it, because I’m a strong believer in management by the states. I commissioned people to begin reviewing it.

And now the grizzly is back. We have more grizzlies now than at any point in my lifetime. In our business, our wilderness operation, we encounter bears every day. They’re fully occupied this ecosystem. And I think we have far more grizzlies than the biologists are listing, although they’re very fair about it, saying it’s a very conservative number.

I think this is a credit to everybody — to the scientists, the government agents, the outfitters, the public — for having brought the grizzly back. We ought to celebrate that.

Now obviously, I have a bias toward hunting because I grew up as a guide, and my family has been in the hunting business for the past 85 years. Those people I’ve hosted over the years love the challenge, the adventure, being in the wilderness, and making contributions back to the government agents, the outfitters, the public — for having brought the grizzly back. We ought to celebrate that.

I’ve always been interested in grizzlies, and I’ve dealt with them all my life. I grew up around my family’s hunting outfit, and we hunted grizzlies. I think when they finally listed them, I think one of the causes in the long term might have been that old Western sense from the homesteading days, the early cattleman
Delisting doesn’t mean you take away the protections, it means you institutionalize what gets bears recovered in the first place — the careful management of mortality, management of conflicts, sanitation to keep garbage and food away from bears, road closures — all so that you have a secure habitat out there. All those things were put in place through a Conservation Strategy, so that when the Endangered Species Act gets pulled out from underneath, the Strategy that takes over and the population and its habitats remain safe.

But all this litigation against the delisting revolves around that. That’s what the whole process is.

It’s not going to benefit management. It’s not going to contribute to another species, save for a story after an arduous and humbly undertaken hunt, can actually be a generative moment of relating. That immersion into the lifeworld of another being and the embrace of an undeniably violent aspect of nature — hunting — can actually bring us into closer communion with the nonhuman world. We are so similar to bears when we hunt them; we are powerful, intelligent, solitary, predatory animals to our own, and by practicing their way in the woods we’re often led to a sense of appreciation larger than ourselves. We’re often inspired to give back. If we could no longer access this hunting relationship with wild animals, how would we deeply and spiritually understand them?

And if there’s ten people who get to hunt grizzly bears, is that going to help save them? I don’t think we need to do that. I think we need to be bigger than that with some animals.

In Closing

As Derek highlights, every practical management decision is a chance to reflect on who we are as a species, and how we treat nonhuman life. If we acknowledge our capacity to both build and destroy our own connections with nature, then we should consider what kind of coexistence will engage greater respect and understanding of the ecosystems that we share. If we choose to see naturally interacting ecosystems as an ideal, what will it take to change centuries of human consumption habits? It may be harder, as a culture, to embark upon a path of preserving life and right our urge to take from the order and flow of nature — but in an age of intense human encroachment on our ecosystems, perhaps the lesson we need to learn is down this road. In deciding which path we want to follow as managers and impactors of the wild world, will we prove able to dream beyond our perceived priority over other forms of life?

Chris Severhew

“We’re entering a different era of conservation, where people are beginning to see an existence value to wild animals — something more careful and meaningful about keeping them alive than consuming them.”

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For 35 years, Chris led human efforts to recover grizzly bear populations in the Continental US. As a PhD student, he co-authored the original Recovery Plan and would act as Coordinator of the inter-agency process until 2016. He helped bring together state, federal and international agendas for the incredibly successful revival of wild grizzlies. He wrote the Recovery Criteria that started this delisting process, and is respected as one of the most experienced bear biologists in the world.

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Grizzly bears were really tough to recover, because they reproduced so slowly. They’re in all these places — and yet we brought them back from the abyss, over 40 years, to healthy populations in the lower 48 states. That’s the success of the Endangered Species Act.