

2015 Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Deaths and What They Mean

Record-Breaking Year for Bear Deaths

The 2015 database of grizzly bear mortalities maintained by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST) reports 59 known and probable grizzly bear mortalities in the Yellowstone ecosystem, of which 54 were human-caused. (“Probable” mortalities are bears counted by the government as dead based on convincing circumstantial evidence, but where the body was not found).

This year breaks the record for numbers of dead grizzlies going back to 1959, when data first started to be systematically and comprehensively collected for Yellowstone grizzly bears. Applying an approximation of the federal estimator of unknown to known and probable bear deaths, there are very likely another 30 plus dead bears in the GYE, yielding a total of roughly 90 dead. (The exact numbers will be reported in the 2015 IGBST annual report sometime in 2016). Thresholds for allowable mortalities have been violated, but it is impossible to tell the exact extent, because of data that have not yet been released.

Subtracting 75 bears, which is the lower end of the confidence interval for the population estimate presented by IGBST Leader Frank Van Manen at December, 2015, Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee meetings, you get 642 bears. Subtracting 90 dead bears this year from 642, you get 552. Van Manen claims such a subtraction amounts to “double-counting,” yet the exact methods and exact rationale for how and when he reckons total population size in real time amounts to yet more of his voodoo science. Bottom line: given the uncertainty in agency methods, there could be as few as 552 bears in the ecosystem now.

A provisional memo signed by US Fish & Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe in September, 2015, reported in a Wyofile story, stated that there would need to be at least 600 bears in the population before a sport hunt would be allowed after delisting. Well...552 is below this basement level of 600 and darn close to the FWS’s recovery plan target of a minimum 500 bears needed to claim “recovery.” If current trends continue, and efforts are not redoubled to reduce conflicts and mortalities, the population will continue to drop.

By way of background, the number of 717 bears represents an estimate of total population size using the so-called Chao 2 methodology. Although the IGBST has applied a different, more accurate method, called Mark-Resight to yield higher estimated numbers, this method is no longer considered “the best available science,” at least according to Director Ashe and the heads of state wildlife agencies in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. Note, though, that federal and state spokespeople freely invoke different numbers based on different methods depending on which better serves their immediate purpose. A more complete discussion of all this can be found in the Numbers Game ([link](#)).

2015 Year’s Deaths in Context

Compared to 2015, the next-highest levels of grizzly bear mortality occurred during 2012, when 55 bears died (known and probable deaths), of which 34 were human-caused.

Next highest was 2010 with 48 known and probable bear deaths, 43 human-caused. And in 2008 (in the hiatus when grizzly bears were delisted) there were 48 known and probable bear deaths, 37 human-caused.

With 54 human-caused mortalities, this year is in a league of its own, 11 more than the previous high of 43 during 2010.

Federal spokespeople have protested that this year's spike in grizzly bear mortalities is an anomaly—that "one year doth not make a trend (link)." True. But, in fact, this year is part of a sustained trend that began in roughly 2007, a trend towards progressively ever more bear deaths at the same time that the population has grown little if at all—and possibly declined (link). If anything is an anomaly it is years such as last year when deaths were low compared to the preceding two years. Yet even during 2014 numbers of bear deaths were higher than any recorded prior to 2008. And all of the records for mortality have been set during the last six years. A trend? Absolutely.

Bear Deaths "Under Investigation" Are Unprecedented

The 19 bear deaths "under investigation" this year are unprecedented and stunning. This is almost 3 times the next highest number during 2012, when 7 deaths were under investigation. By way of clarification: a death is usually "under investigation" when there is cause to suspect foul play. This year's suspicious deaths fall neatly into the time of the spring black bear hunt (2) and the fall hunting season (17). Eight of these occurred in Montana and 11 in Wyoming. The number in Montana is somewhat surprising because the state has comparatively fewer bears.

It is almost certain that these are hunter-related deaths (or by poachers, although the line between hunters and poachers is often blurred). In the past, IGBST records show that deaths under investigation fell into the categories of hunter-related incidents, self-defense kills, and mistaken identity by black bear hunters.

It is worth contrasting the numbers of deaths under investigation this year with other years when there were also high levels of bear mortality. During 2012, when 55 bears died, only 7 were under investigation. In 2014 when 28 bears died, 6 were under investigation. In 2011, when 44 bears died, only 6 were under investigation. In 2010, when 48 bears died, again, only 6 were under investigation. In 2008 when 48 bears died, 6 were under investigation. This shows how out of whack this year is.

All of this begs the question: what is going on? The FWS has not changed how it determines what cases they are going to investigate. So something has changed in the circumstances involving people killing bears.

One hypothesis is that the thugs are tired of waiting for delisting and are taking advantage of any situation that presents itself to kill bears. Another possible contributing factor, suggested by a FWS law enforcement officer, is that with virtually no prosecution of cases where people dubiously claim self-defense in the killing of a grizzly bear (when, in fact, it is not a legitimate self-defense situation), more such incidents are being reported. If true, it means that thugs know there are no consequences for their criminal behavior.

Human-caused Mortalities Have Long Been Excessive

According to the IGBST annual reports and IGBST/FWS standards and methods, allowable mortality limits (for females or males or both) have been exceeded in 8 years out of the last 11, every year but 2007, 2009, and 2013. It is true that methods used to calculate total population size and allowable mortalities have changed during this time, but the thresholds were established to signal the need for more precautionary management if they were violated.

These excessive death rates are undoubtedly why the population has plateaued since 2002 and has most likely been declining since 2007. This year exacerbates the downward trend, shown in this graph of federal data:

<http://www.grizzlytimes.org/#!blank/c1sjy>

Van Manen of the IGBST claims that the Chao 2 estimate is biased low, which means that there are more bears in the population. But, he does not admit an important fact: mortality estimates are biased low too, and there could be more dead bears than accounted for (link).

The point is that the level of mortality experienced this year on top of the last 8 years cannot be sustained for very long without jeopardizing the fate of the population.

More Can Be Done to Reduce Mortality

According to the US Fish & Wildlife Service, most human-caused grizzly bear mortality is avoidable.

In four different planning efforts since 1982, the agencies have made recommendations about how to reduce hunter-caused mortalities. The highest priority was given to increasing law enforcement and agency field presence during hunting season. This has not happened. Hunters in the backcountry know they are beyond the reach of the law.

The agency recommendations are summarized here:

http://media.wix.com/ugd/d2beb3_a0ef80be4aad4436b70e532b3849498c.pdf

Much can be done to ensure a healthy future for the grizzly bear in Yellowstone and prevent years of excessive killing like 2015 has turned out to be. But it requires redoubling commitment and effort.

Artful Dodgers

The government has long practiced the art of dodging the problem of dealing meaningfully with excessive mortalities caused by hunters and livestock operators. (Garbage is far easier to deal with than cantankerous and politically well-connected hunters and ranchers).

Whenever a year of relatively low mortalities occurs, the agencies seize the media opportunity to brag about management success and the need to delist. Whenever it is a bad year, like this, they are silent. Or, when pressed, FWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator Chris Servheen maintains that the population has grown three fold since the time of listing (link). This claim belies the fact that since 2007 the population has likely been declining – a trend which will erase the gains of the past unless corrective steps are taken. Moreover, his statement is a classic case of disingenuous data spinning given that he is

comparing an estimate of the minimum number of bear likely to have been in the population at the time of listing with an estimate of total population size now—a classic case of comparing apples with oranges (for more on this, see [this link](#)).

Servheen asserts that the states are doing a good job and will do fine with the task of managing grizzly bears without federal oversight, when the track record of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana is dismal when it comes to managing large carnivores. Wyoming, the ring leader of the grizzly bear delisting push, is the agency that established 90% of the state as a free fire zone within which any and all wolves could be killed.

It should be noted that Servheen has been pushing for delisting since 1992, when the population was in even more dire straits ([link](#)). Why should he be trusted when he says all will be well with Yellowstone's grizzly bears after delisting?

As discussed above, Van Manen evades the problem of excessive mortalities by claiming that current population estimator, Chao 2, is biased low, suggesting that recent mortalities rates are not a big deal. The government had the opportunity to adopt a less biased estimator, Mark Resight, which it rejected. One reason could have been that it showed declining trends ([link](#)) – an inconvenient truth for those pushing a delisting agenda. The government is trying to have it both ways, to confuse the public.

Van Manen also claims that this higher mortality is the result of higher densities – “more sardines in the same can”, to use one of his favorite metaphors. This claim has been flatly rebutted in a blog by David Mattson ([link](#)). Additional information on this issue can be found by following [this link](#).

A FWS spokesman recently claimed that the population will not be allowed to drop below 600 animals ([link](#)). But nothing in any current plans, state or federal, prevents this from happening. And, no corrective actions are being pursued to keep 2016 from being another bloody year like 2015. If more is not done to stop the hemorrhaging, Yellowstone's grizzly bears are in serious trouble.