

Real Bears, Symbol Bears, and Problem Solving

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Conservation of grizzly bears in the Rocky Mountains at times looks more like a bar room brawl than a professional, scientific undertaking. Cagey bureaucrats, uncompromising activists, and swaggering senators waded into the free-for-all, each claiming to be the sole representative of truth and goodness. This posturing leaves observers

wondering what's going to become of the real bears out there in the hills—as distinct from the symbolic bears that people fight over.

What does happen to a species that has the mixed fortune of becoming a potent political symbol? NRCC has had a range of experiences with “charismatic” species that became symbols for various interests—black-footed ferrets in Wyoming, koalas in Australia, bald eagles in Idaho. As Tim Clark outlines in his account of ferret conservation, *Averting Extinction: Reconstructing Endangered Species Recovery* (Yale University Press, 1997), sometimes the good of the biological species takes a back-seat to control of the symbol.

Grizzlies are no exception, especially in a contentious election year. Grandstanding politicians use grizzlies as a potent symbol to rally conservative voters: they equate grizzlies with loss of resource-extraction jobs, reduced recreational access, and interference from “outside interests.” There is a subtext here worth noting: for some, grizzlies symbolize a loss of power, a loss of opportunities to practice skills (e.g., logging), and a loss of esteemed positions (e.g., breadwinners, providers) in our culture. These losses exist independently of grizzly bears, but it is bears that provide a focal point for their discontent.

On the other side, grizzlies rep-

resent many positive things—wilderness, freedom, and America's bounteous natural heritage. Grizzlies tend to benefit from their connection with these values, because these relationships tend to bring plenty of attention and resources to bear conservation. These associations may have drawbacks though. To the extent that the values grizzlies symbolize are antithetical to some people, these same people will be hostile to the conservation of grizzlies as real animals.

Symbols and Communication

Most of us are well aware of how symbols affect our thinking. Communication, especially among large numbers of people across great territories, inevitably involves symbols. Effective symbols are distinctively recognizable and bring strong emotional responses. Also, symbols are usually not accompanied by rigorous factual information—the better to keep their meaning fluid so they appeal to lots of different people.

How does this emotional process square with “rational” endeavors like wildlife ecology? Typically, it doesn't, to the everlasting frustration of wildlife professionals.

Just because we cannot stop the symbol-building process, however, does not mean we should ignore it. Instead, wildlife professionals need to influence how symbols develop and how they are used. Wildlife

professionals, with their skills, knowledge, and credibility, can help change the way cultures view controversial animals like grizzly bears. There are several complementary approaches to doing this. NRCC has done extensive development of one promising strategy that

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involves localized problem-solving efforts. In “shop talk,” we refer to these efforts as *prototypes*.

The Prototype Method

Prototypes are generally small-scale projects that adapt to changing conditions as they unfold. They are not quite experiments because practical problems seldom offer us the luxury of control groups and easily-manipulated variables. But we want to do better than just blindly trying the first expedient solution that presents itself. So our prototyping efforts involve careful analysis to define problems and systematic efforts to learn as we go along. Reflecting our commitments to democratic decision making and

interdisciplinary analysis, participation in prototype exercises is open to anyone interested.

Grizzly bear conservation prototypes can take several forms, depending on the local problems to be solved. Broadly, we are interested in two major problem-solving themes:

- addressing real or perceived local problems in grizzly management (e.g., safety, sanitation, or integrating extractive activities with bear conservation); and
- improving and conserving bear habitat (e.g., road obliteration, restoring berry-producing shrubs, or providing bear-watching opportunities without compromising habitat use).

Over the past decade, NRCC has actively developed prototype opportunities in grizzly conservation, ranging from workshops for bear managers to on-the-ground research and problem solving. Currently, we are engaged in major prototyping projects to reconnect the Yellowstone grizzly population with historic habitats and other populations in the Rockies.

One of these efforts operates in Montana's Madison Valley, where grizzlies from Yellowstone are gradually reoccupying historic habitats. In this prototype, we are working with land managers, ranchers, and citizens to develop a local conservation plan for grizzlies.

There are also a number of notable prototype efforts underway elsewhere in grizzly country. These projects started in response to local problems in grizzly conservation and have produced valuable lessons. NRCC is currently working to evaluate these lessons and assemble them in an internet database so that others can make use of the trial-and-error that has already taken place.

Prototypes and Symbols: Changing What Bears Mean

What do localized prototypes have to do with the broader political and cultural context of grizzly conservation? At first glance, not

much: these projects aren't designed to be glitzy public relations showcases. They are intended to be practical, problem-solving efforts, safely beyond emotional, conflictual posturing.

From experience, however, we know that larger socio-cultural processes impinge on what can be done for grizzlies at the local level. Budgets, staffing, and the behavior of land managers are all heavily affected by decisions in Washington, D. C., and other political centers.

These decisions, in turn, are formed by debates and communication that are carried on through the use of symbols. In grizzly conservation, symbols often take the form of horror stories about how grizzlies have directly or indirectly ruined someone's life. While there may be some useful lessons to learn from such cases, they are not an adequate basis for thoughtful decisions. Nevertheless, some political leaders find it useful to let bears symbolize a lot of negative things because the grizzly is a potent and recognizable icon. Thus, real bears suffer because they are convenient, effective symbols.

Symbols are only effective, however, if people have reason to

believe that they have some basis in reality. Stories that depict grizzlies as the downfall of communities and economies appeal to many people because they are plausible: grizzlies have huge habitat requirements, prey on livestock, and can be dangerous to people. But how accurate is that symbol? How deep is the incompatibility between the needs of people and the requirements of grizzly conservation?

Successful prototypes that show grizzly conservation being integrated with other objectives are evidence that negative Symbol Bears are not the whole story. Participatory prototypes can demonstrate that regular citizens have genuine opportunities to address directly the burdens associated with having bears as neighbors. This weakens the symbolic association between bears and insensitive elitism by bureaucrats and environmentalists.

To employ prototypes as counter-symbols, wildlife professionals will need to work closely with skilled communicators. There are entire university departments, academic disciplines, and dozens of firms that specialize in getting messages across to mass audiences. Popular publications and the World-



Steve Primm introduces young students in the Madison Valley to ways of learning about grizzly bears. Read some of their responses on page 8.

Feedback from Youngsters

Education is an important component of our work on grizzly conservation in southwestern Montana. Every spring we participate in a three-day science and nature event for area elementary students at Wall Creek State Game Range. This is a good opportunity to work with youngsters, teachers, and parents to discuss grizzly bear research, safety in bear country, and habitat conservation.

One popular presentation on research techniques introduced students (K-5) to "hair snagging" techniques for gathering DNA samples in non-intrusive ways. Students were particularly impressed with our potent scent lures.

This year our presentation focused on the importance of whitebark pine to bears and other animals in the local mountains. The kids got to sample pine nuts, examine bear scats that resulted from eating large quantities of the nuts, and discuss threats to the future of whitebark ecosystems.

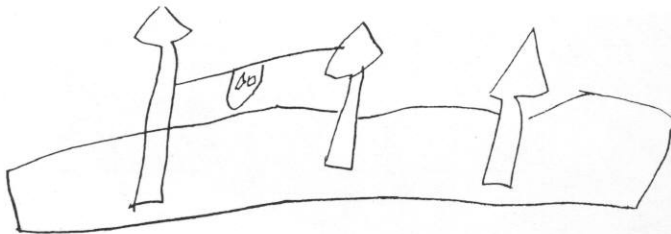


Thank you for telling us about bears. I really learned a lot about bears. But the bait kind of stunk. Sincerely, Savannah

I had fun. I didn't know that trees could get sick. I liked the nuts that we tried. I

thought the nuts. Thank you for letting us come. From Ashley

Thank you for telling us about bears. I really learned something from you. I hope you come back again. I really smelled it was stinky. Thank you! Sincerely, Justin



I had a good time learning about bears and pine trees. It was fun. Thanks, Love, Whitney

Thank you for showing us the bear bait. I really enjoyed the bear trap. Sincerely, Austin

I hope you had fun!! I loved the seeds. I had fun. Did you? Thanks. Love, Sky

I liked the taste of the pine nuts. Thank you for coming. Love, D



My friend told me the droppings were fake. I had a fun time. Your friend, Ben

Thank you so much. I loved it there. I eat one of the nuts. They were good. Bears do like nuts. Love, Emily

wide Web are very effective ways of reaching people around the world.

We must re-emphasize that prototypes are NOT merely communication gambits. Rather, they are intended foremost to make practical progress and facilitate learning. That said, wildlife professionals need to overcome their reluctance to work on practical problems and engage in "popularization" of their work.

Finding out what works—technically and culturally—in real world grizzly conservation efforts is vital for survival of bears in the Rockies. Scientific uncertainty and high potential for conflict make such learning a prerequisite for long-term progress. Paradoxically, these characteristics tend to inhibit learning by increasing the likelihood and consequences of failures.

Prototypes, which operate on

restricted spatial scales, with manageable variables and smaller sets of participants, provide opportunities for learning and innovation. That is, prototypes can "fly under radar," unlike large-scale interventions that may mobilize their own insurmountable opposition. As these successes accumulate, we can change what grizzlies mean to people and mobilize action for long-term conservation. □