

FROM THE CENTER

Blessed Are the Risk Takers



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**These risk takers,
and others like them,
understand that people
are as much a part of
those ecosystems as
any other creature.**

Having been employed for some 41 years as a wildlife biologist, a natural resources manager, and a professor of Wildlife Conservation, I pay close attention to what the “media” is reporting and editorializing about related to those issues. Over those four decades of professional life, things have changed dramatically as far as attention to “wildlife issues.” Until about 20 years ago, it was rare to read about wildlife in the newspapers except in the sports pages and, then, in stories about hunting or fishing.

Today, it is common to read about wildlife and conservation issues on the front, business, and editorial pages of those same newspapers. And, it is equally common to see news

stories and editorial pontification related to wildlife on local and national television news shows. Most of these stories are not related to hunting or fishing per se. The stories tend to center on conflicts between polarized concerned groups and government wildlife and land management agencies over natural resources management – or the lack thereof. More often than not, these conflicts swirl around the application of the Endangered Species Act. These conflicts and the polarized shouting matches frequently (inevitably?) erupt when species are listed or plans for their “recovery” are developed and applied.

I suspect that most who have been involved in such a melee come out thinking - “there must be a better way.” But, then, the brawl breaks out again in another place over another species

and history repeats itself. And, the animosity of the folks negatively affected builds and, their resentment lingers long, and the ranks of the disaffected swell. If we are fortunate, a “magic moment” sometimes arises when a group of “risk takers” that, weary of combat, is ready to hear the ancient prescription voiced by the prophet Isaiah as “Come now, let us reason together.” Maybe, just maybe, such a moment is at hand in the mountain West.

One of the “hot button” issues that has been a regular feature of the news outlets in Montana and Idaho for the last several months has been the intensifying debate over the reintroduction of grizzly bears into the Bitterroot Range of Idaho and Montana. Clearly, the chances of the survival of the great bear in the 48 contiguous states would be significantly enhanced by the establishment of another viable population. The one place in the lower 48 states where such an attempt at reintroduction seems at all feasible is in the broad expanse of public lands in the Selway-Bitterroot country that is in wilderness or backcountry status or is relatively remote from human habitation.

As would be expected, arguments pro and con abound. After all, we are talking grizzly bears here. Some folks are just plain scared for reasons of human safety. Others are fearful of the grizzly’s potential as a predator of livestock. But, the biggest barrier to the acceptance of an attempt at reintroduction seems to be the fear of what could be the result of the perceived to be heavy hand of Federal enforcers of the Endangered Species Act. They ask, once the griz is established, would ever-increasing restrictions on human activities such as recreation, timber management, and live-

stock grazing then become inevitable? Or, if the introduced bears did become an intolerable problem would there be any possibility that the animals could be removed? Would this new card in the land management game trump all others? Why would local people with the most to lose or gain from the introduction take the economic, social, political risk inherent in the reintroduction effort?

Recognizing the significance of these concerns, a group of folks with an intense interest in the issue dared to actually sit down and actually “reason together.” On one side were those with a passion to see grizzlies returned to the Selway-Bitterroot ecosystem. On the other side were those who thought of themselves as conservationists but derived their daily bread from grazing, forestry, and recreation. And, in the middle, were the professionals from the wildlife and land management agencies. These pragmatic people - conservationists all - included Hank Fischer (Defenders of Wildlife), Tom France (National Wildlife Federation), Seth Diamond (Intermountain Forest Industry Association), Dan Johnson (Resource Organization on Timber Supply), and Chris Servheen of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These, and all they enlisted in their cause, were the risk takers.

They were quick to see that opportunities existed, in the biological sense, for the reintroduction of the grizzly into clearly a unique situation that would require a tailor-made approach. They discerned that such an effort was unlikely to be acceptable at state and local levels if there were to be rigid autocratic controls on the effort exercised solely, and at discretion, by “the

feds.” They deemed political resistance under such circumstances certain to be sustained, fierce and, quite likely, successful. In most such circumstances, the confabulation would have ceased after one raucous meeting with each key player retreating to their intractable and well-established positions – i.e., to safe ground.

Yet, that did not happen. Why? The risk takers dared ask – and answer – “what if” questions. *What if* some arrangement was made whereby local people with the most to win and the most to lose were given some real influence, even power, in guiding the reintroduction effort? *What if* arrangements were made so that the inflexibilities, real or perceived, in the application of the Endangered Species Act were reconsidered and applied in a more pragmatic and flexible fashion? *What if? What if?*

The participants were taking risks with their reputations with their constituencies and colleagues by even asking such questions – much less exploring answers. The standard politically correct response, which had evolved over time, was a standard *modus operandi* - “never give an inch!”

Yet, for some reason, this unique combination of people, issue, and time produced a magic moment. Such moments do occur – I’ve been there and seen that. But, determinably seizing such a moment is even more rare

– far too rare. These risk takers did not let this magic moment slip from their grasp.

In the spirit of the moment, the risk takers pounded out a consensus - a compromise – upon which they could stand together. Consensus did not mean total satisfaction for any of the participants. It meant that, collectively, they had a proposal that they believed combined ecological factors, economic feasibility, and legal/social/political factors in a proposed management approach that, just maybe, could afford the grizzly a chance to return to its ancestral home in the Bitterroots.

The environmentalists involved took a risk in accepting the flexibility and attention to economic and social considerations that were essential components of any plan to the industry folks. The industry folks took a risk in saying that they would accept and participate in a try at reintroduction of the bear knowing that their lives would become more complex as a result. The agency people took a risk in going with less than an optimum biological approach and in agreeing to share power with a committee of citizens.

Those risks proved to be more than theoretical. Criticism began to pour in as the plan was reviewed. These risk takers seemed to draw criticism from every quarter. Grizzly bear experts were divided (as usual). Those

who were scared of grizzlies – for any of a number of reasons – were not reassured. Those who relish brandishing the club provided by rigid application of the Endangered Species Act felt power slipping away. National environmental organizations seemed fearful of the precedent that could be established by allowing local significant influence in public land management. And, many that simply mistrust “the feds” were not mollified.

As public hearings were conducted and the attention in the press mounted, I was approached by representatives of the risk takers and asked if I would speak out on the issue. After listening carefully, I agreed to speak out – not on the biological feasibility of the reintroduction for I am not a grizzly bear expert – in support of the process and in support of the risk takers. What follows is an Editorial/Opinion piece that I submitted to the *Missoulian* (the newspaper for Missoula, Montana) in that regard and which they kindly printed in mid-October.

“If I were to distill my forty years as a land and wildlife steward into one significant observation, it would be this. The most significant progress toward conserving our rich natural heritage has come not from new laws, court decisions, nor via ground-breaking scientific research (I say that as a researcher).



Whatever happens in the ongoing drama of the reintroduction of the great bear in the Bitterroots, we owe these risk takers some appreciation as they ponder the application of the age old solution to conflict brought on by building hubris on both extremes —
"...Come, let us reason together."

Rather, advances took place when people of good will and intelligence stepped back from the rhetorical din that surrounds contentious resource issues and became part of the solution. I have watched the efforts of conservationists and the timber industry to craft a plan for restoring grizzly bears to the Bitterroots while respecting local needs and

economies. The proposed "citizen management approach" may provide an important approach to resolution of the recurring polarizing debates over the recovery of endangered species.

"I am not an expert in the biology of grizzly bears. Therefore, I leave the debate concerning grizzly bear biology and the feasibility of their reintroduction into the Bitterroots to others. However, I am experienced in dealing with contentious issues concerning endangered or threatened species - first, as the leader for teams that dealt with the spotted owl/old growth ecosystem issues in the

Northwest and, then, as Chief of the U.S. Forest Service.

"I learned that the key to successful approaches to recovery of endangered species has roots in the understanding and support of the people most effected. That support, or tolerance, is more

likely when those people have the capability of influencing decisions and management actions.

"The Bitterroot area contains some sixteen million acres of National Forests with some four million acres of designated Wilderness. It seems likely that the greatest limiting factor in the recovery equation may not be available habitat but human tolerance. Certainly, without such tolerance, any effort at reintroduction will likely fail.

"Certainly, the state and federal officials that I worked with for over 40 years are fully capable of overseeing a grizzly recovery effort. Yet, it is well to note that times - and social/political circumstances - have changed over the past decade. The days of traditional command and control approaches to wildlife management, and certainly recovery of endangered species, are rapidly fading into the past. Local people want, and ever more effectively demand, influence in the management of endangered species with which they must live.

"The challenge is to balance this potential new authority with an enhanced sense of responsibility. Our public lands, and the endangered species that reside thereon, belong to and are the responsibility of all Americans - be they in Montana, Idaho, or yes, New Jersey. But, it is local people that live in unique situations defined by particular combinations of geographic, historical, economic, social, political and ecological factors that have the most to gain - and the most to lose. It is in the interactions of these factors that approaches to successful management of endangered species must be found. Empowered local citizens, must be charged to abide by the same scientific standards that guide

agency professionals. The "citizen management approach" to grizzly recovery in the Bitterroots seems a worthwhile approach to balancing local/national interests. That approach can, no doubt, be "tweaked" to produce continuous improvement. Likely, this is the only proposal on the table that makes a try at grizzly reintroduction feasible - biologically and politically.

"Surely, there are approaches - in the pure biological sense - that would afford a better chance for successful establishment and retention of a viable population of grizzlies in the Bitterroots. But, are these approaches even remotely possible in the political, economic, and social sense? As a pragmatist, such seems unlikely to me.

"That leaves two alternatives. The first is no reintroduction of grizzlies in the Bitterroots. The second is an attempt at reintroduction with enough consideration of the concerns and welfare of local people, coupled with a significant chance of success in the biological sense, to make the gamble acceptable.

"Predictably, the issue is drifting toward polarization. These extremes are - no attempt at reintroduction under any circumstances or reintroduction with such constraints on human activities and with all the regulatory baggage that has proven such an anathema to people potentially affected by recovery efforts. Those who oppose reintroduction may well carry the day. If so, those who insist on an approach that is neither economically, socially, or politically feasible will have helped assure that outcome.

"Species restoration is not just about drawing protected areas on maps and connecting those areas with corridors. Species restorations are more, much

more, about accepting that the public's lands can, to some degree, accommodate diverse uses and that the needs of the grizzly must be integrated with human needs and a cultivated tolerance.

"Here, suddenly, has emerged an opportunity for the people most concerned to help decide if they are willing to share their habitat with the great bear. The grizzly is certainly what Aldo Leopold referred to as the "numenon" or spirit of this special last best place – the name and image is pervasive in Idaho and Montana and is seen and felt at every turn. It is that to be reality or remembered only in myth? If it is to be reality, let the people who are an integral part of this special place help pioneer the way.

"A wise man told me early in my career that, in natural resource management and in life, it was well to understand that "the quality of the ultimate compromise is far more important than the impeccable correctness of one's original position." Perhaps, it is time to focus on an ultimate compromise.

"Are we willing to afford the grizzly a chance to return to the Bitterroots? If so, are we willing to take a new, pragmatic approach that makes that chance possible? A "yes" to both questions produces a blinking yellow signal that indicates "proceed with caution." A "no" to either produces a glaring red light that signals "no to grizzlies in the Bitterroots."

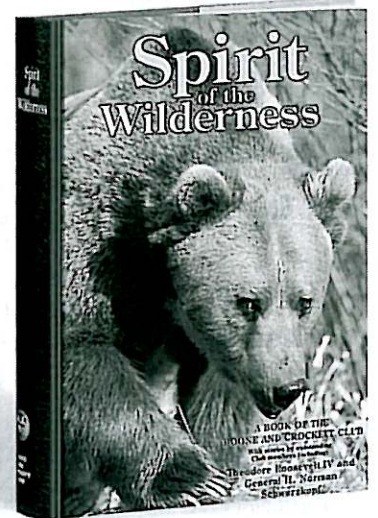
So ended my editorial. This potential approach, in principal, is not only applicable to the issues surrounding the potential reintroduction of the grizzly bear in the Bitterroots of Idaho and Montana. This is about understanding that political/social circumstances surrounding the application of the Endangered

Species Act are rapidly evolving. The approach laid out by the risk takers represents a shift from top down, autocratic, command and control, approaches to achieving the worthy goal of the Endangered Species Act to "maintain ecosystems on which threatened and endangered species depend."

The risk takers realized that such a shift in approach is both inevitable and increasingly pushed ahead by public and political demand – even if not yet matched by developments. These risk takers, and others like them, understand that people are as much a part of those ecosystems as any other creature. Whatever happens in the ongoing drama of the reintroduction of the great bear in the Bitterroots, we owe these risk takers some appreciation as they ponder the application of the age old solution to conflict brought on by building hubris on both extremes – "...Come, let us reason together." For, in truth, all across the history of human endeavor, only risk takers have changed the *status quo*.

The conservation movement's pantheon of heroes is comprised primarily of risk takers who lived vigorously in the present and dreamed of a future that centered on generations and things yet to come. One of this particular band of risk takers, Seth Diamond, died in an aircraft crash in the course of his duties. He dreamed of and worked for a future that he visualized but did not live to see. Perhaps we can say of his vision and efforts, and of the vision and efforts of all the risk takers in conservation efforts over the ages ... "All of these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13). ▲▲▲

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