

BEA

IN 1990 I RESEARCHED THE NATIONAL PARK Service's (NPS) management practices at Yellowstone National Park, specifically as they applied to the slaughter of bison that inadvertently wander outside the park's boundaries and onto neighboring rangeland.

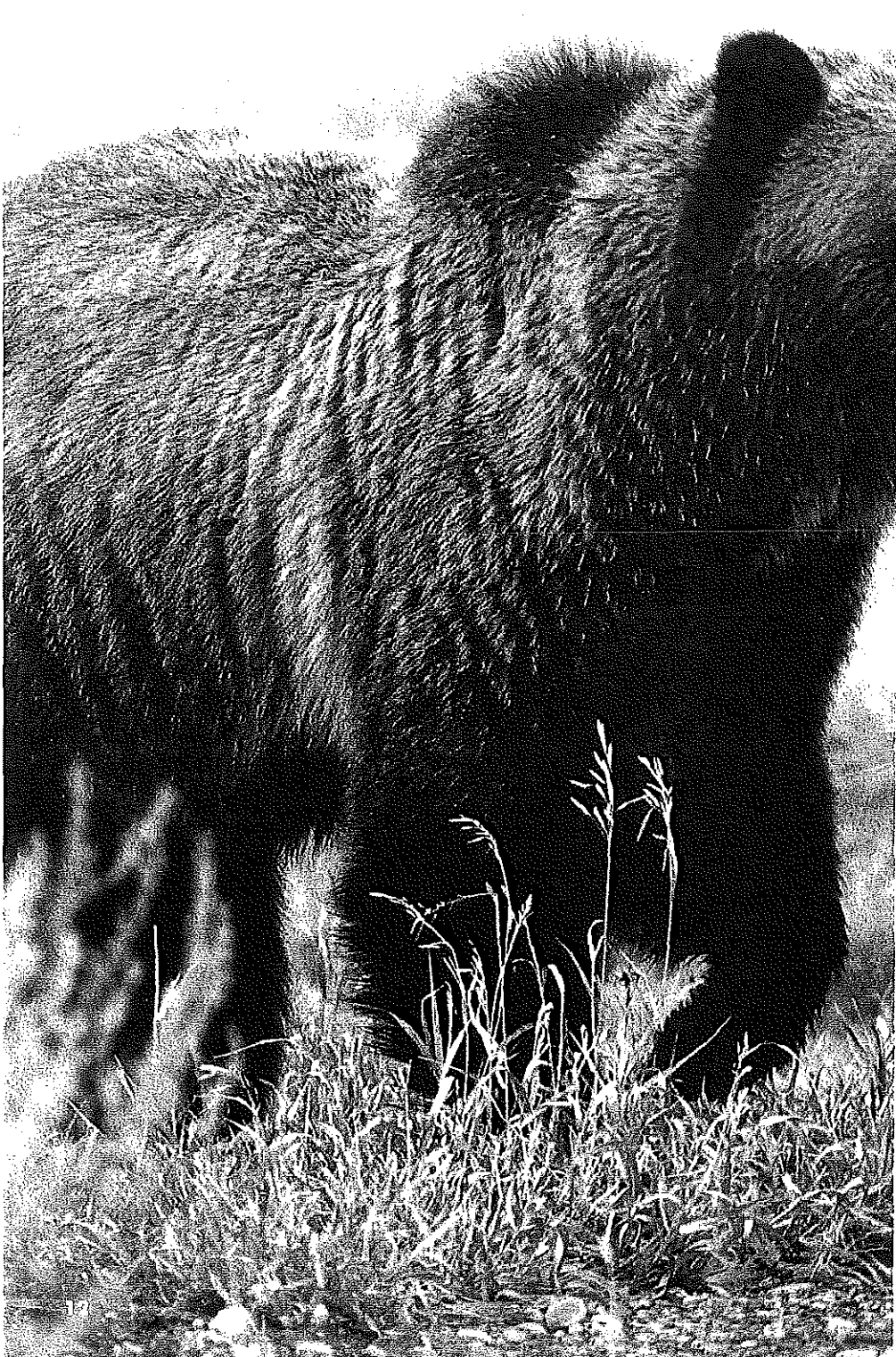
After what I saw and learned, I wonder what the public's reaction would be if it knew what I know about how national parks are managed in the 1990s.

Someday I'll probably sit down and write a diatribe against allowing snowmobiles and ski resorts in Yellowstone in the winter. As recently as 1986 the official purpose of the park, as stated in the NPS management plan, was to "permit natural processes to function within the park ecosystem with minimum disturbance by man's activities." How ironic that sounds!

Today commercial interests are harming our parks, betraying not just the bison but also all the other animals that inhabit Yellowstone and the surrounding national forest. I think of Bear #134 and hope that her story will make people fully aware of the hypocrisy of the policymakers who run our national park system.

Yellowstone officials forbid the naming of the park's animals. The last thing the park's management wants to do is to personalize or individualize a grizzly bear—or any other animal, for that matter. Instead, the park's bears, many of which have been tranquilized and tagged at one time or another, are assigned numbers. Grizzly Bear #134 was a big, healthy female, and she was very fond of fish. She was an excellent fisherbear, it would seem. For years both park rangers and visitors would recognize her big, shambling figure fishing up and down the shoreline of her favorite lake. "There's old 134," someone would yell, and, sure enough, the old girl would be there fishing her heart out.

She no doubt afforded thousands of park visitors a good look at one of the grandest



JEFF HENRY

R #134

BY DAVID K. WILLS

sights in the world: one of nature's largest predators in its natural environment, doing what bears do best—acting bearlike. Imagine the photo opportunities this one bear provided to a public whose fascination with the legendary wild animals in the park is insatiable.

In nonscientific terms, grizzly bears tend to come in two types. I call type I grizzlies human-distant. They get as far away from people as they can as fast as they can. Through either good sense or a bad experience, they have wisely chosen to avoid two-legged, furless critters like the plague. Now, park management likes this type of bear, and you can't fault the NPS for that. Nothing ruins a chief ranger's day more than the news that some Yellowstone grizzly has eaten a camper, even though such an event is extraordinarily rare.

Type II grizzlies are what I call human-close. They seem to enjoy human-bear social encounters—at least, they enjoy the food that people tend to serve at such receptions. Bears—and grizzlies are no exception—are notorious gluttons; they'll eat anything. They are energy conservers, and some of them realize that they can save a lot of energy by showing up along roadways or wherever else humans congregate and taking the handouts that invariably are offered despite park prohibitions. It sure is a lot easier than catching a swift elk calf whose mama is not happy about your trying to eat her baby. Bears also have a sweet tooth, and jelly doughnuts and peanut-butter sandwiches taste a lot better than a month-old winter-killed mule deer.

Park management has a problem with human-close bears because of the "increased potential for human injury resulting from human-bear encounters." The official response to a human-bear interaction has usually been to tranquilize the bear and move it to a remote area of Yellowstone. The trouble with the relocation policy is that grizzly bears, being tenacious types, more often than not go back and resume their old habits. Such grizzlies, and there are a lot of them, are then eliminated; to wit, they are shot.

Bear #134 is a rare sort of grizzly: a type III. Type III grizzlies (and #134 is the only one I know of) are what I call human-passive. Bear #134 didn't give a hang about

the human beings in her park. She didn't run away and she didn't start begging; she just kept minding her own business and doing what she did best—fishing the waters in her part of the park. She was so occupied with her fishing that she seldom looked up even when people stopped, took pictures, and generally made fools of themselves watching her. (I don't fish, but I have a cousin that feels almost as #134 does about fishing; it's like a religion to him.)

In 1985 Bear #134 became a problem for park rangers.

Around 1983 some brilliant bureaucrat had decided that Yellowstone National Park needed a resort where tourists could congregate en masse and enjoy the recreational opportunities the park offered. Years earlier the NPS had decided to build a small resort near the Fishing Bridge, in the prime grizzly bear habitat of the park's whole ecosystem, at a time when providing a resort was considered a good way to give park visitors more recreational opportunities. Even then environmentalists had feared that once the door was opened to development in Yellowstone, there would be no end to it. The Fishing Bridge site had been bitterly opposed by the environmental community, but, nonetheless, Fishing Bridge was built, and in the NPS's estimation, it was a success. So in 1983, when the NPS wanted to build a bigger resort, called Grant Village, in another part of Yellowstone and environmentalists fought it as well, they were fighting a losing battle.

NPS officials had said, "Let us build Grant Village, complete with condo-style lodging and a marina, and we'll shut down the development at the Fishing Bridge." The site proposed for Grant Village was also in an area that was good grizzly bear habitat, but the NPS had argued that the project would have a negligible impact on the park's bears.

Although Bear #134 had been fishing her creeks, lakes, and streams, delighting the

tourists and bothering no one, for a couple of years, her favorite lake, as you've probably guessed, was right smack where the NPS had proceeded to build Grant Village. It had been kind of convenient to have Bear #134 around to give the tourists a great memory to take home with them, but once Grant Village was completed in 1985, the development's impact on her was devastating.

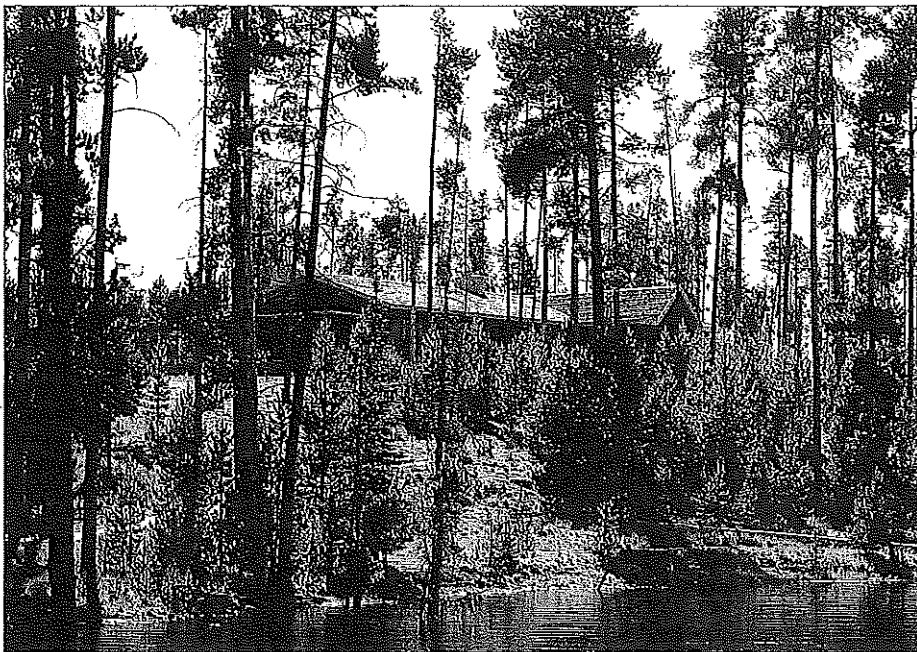


Opposite: Bear #134 in the early years—nobody bothered her, and she bothered nobody. **Above:** Hordes of tourists gather to photograph Bear #134 as she fishes in Yellowstone National Park. Grant Village stopped all that.

Park officials decided that it was no longer acceptable to allow #134 to fish her creeks, lakes, and streams, because of the "increased potential for human injury resulting from human-bear encounters." They certainly couldn't shoot her; even though she had a number rather than a name, she had acquired a following. The public's reaction to her death would create a severe problem. So they moved her—six times over the next five years, to be exact.

In September 1986 they trapped her, put a radio collar on her, and relocated her to Blacktail Plateau. As an NPS document describes the incident, she had been caught "in front of the Lake Lodge. Bear had been frequenting the lake developed area." The document fails to mention that #134 had been fishing that lake area for years, since long before the lake-development idea took shape in some park manager's head.

In 1987 #134 went back to her favorite lake



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and was subsequently trapped; she was relocated to the Flat Mountain arm of Yellowstone Lake on May 20. Sometime around the end of August her radio collar quit working.

In April 1988 a bear wearing a collar was seen fishing at the Grant Village lake. The collar was inoperable, so a positive I.D. wasn't possible. It didn't really matter; everyone recognized #134. The old girl was back.

Park officials were getting tired of the whole affair, so they implemented one of their favorite wildlife-management plans: "aversive conditioning," which consists of shooting bothersome animals with high-velocity plastic bullets that are very painful. They must have hurt Bear #134, because each time she was hit, she ran off bellowing and disappeared into the woods. Several days after each shooting she'd be back, fishing.

It is interesting to note that despite all the harassment—the trapping, the shooting, and the handling—#134 never once acted in any way that could be interpreted as being the slightest bit threatening. She was trapped and relocated twice more in 1988.

In the spring of 1989 she showed up with two cubs. One of them, a small female, appeared to have been injured; she was said to have puncture wounds infested with maggots near her hip. On June 2 #134 and the injured cub were trapped. Park rangers tried to get #134's other cub into the trap without success. On June 3 #134 and her injured cub were released. Yellowstone National Park's records don't mention whether the injured cub was treated, nor do they explain why

a severely injured animal was released. The records do mention that rangers found the cub's carcass the next day and sent it to the park's diagnostic lab. The lab said that the cub had probably been bitten by a larger animal, because her backbone was shattered.

Bear #134 and her other cub were relocated by helicopter once again.

Park records indicate that on July 24, 1989, #134 was observed at her favorite fishing area with her cub. The records state, "Large crowd approaches to within fifty feet of bears; female charges crowd, gets to within fifteen feet of a visitor." Bear #134 hadn't made contact with, much less wounded or killed, anyone even after the intense pressure of having people venture so close to her cub. It seems to me that #134 had contained herself pretty well, considering all the nonsense she'd had to put up with. Even the meekest creature on Earth would have lost its patience by that time.

On April 17, 1990, an NPS news release announced that #134 had been transported to a research lab at Washington State University. The NPS must have figured that she wouldn't find her way back to Yellowstone. Her cub was relocated to a more remote area of the park. Today #134, an animal whose only crime was to live naturally in a sanctuary that had been established for the protection of bears and other wildlife, is confined to a cage with iron bars and concrete floors. She serves as a living sample supplier for scientists who want to measure blood levels and analyze fat samples from grizzly bears.

It doesn't take a wildlife biologist to recognize that a diminished quality of life awaits an animal taken from the wild and placed in captivity. One has to wonder how the thousands of people who delighted in seeing Bear #134 fishing at her lake would react if they knew the story of her removal. Would they be sickened by the thought of her in a cage? Would they be sad or angry?

I don't know how bears define happiness or display contentment. (I assume that when they lie in the warm sun, they enjoy the heat, and when they frolic with their cubs, they take pleasure in the social interaction. A creature doesn't have to be able to spell *autonomy* to experience distress at the loss of freedom.) I do know that what happened to #134 was wrong and that somebody ought to keep that kind of "wildlife management" from continuing.

In fact, it is not just continuing; it is flourishing. Wild animals that live in Yellowstone and other national parks are being trapped, moved, harassed, and shot under the direction and authority of NPS management—the very same management that cultivates a public image of being animal protector and park steward.

Since I came back from Yellowstone, I haven't been able to fall asleep at night without picturing that magnificent animal pacing back and forth in her cage. If the desire to fish kept drawing her back to her lake year after year despite all efforts to dissuade her, imagine how she must feel in such miserable confinement.

Oh, yes—remember the resort at the Fishing Bridge that was going to be shut down when Grant Village was completed? It is still open. ■

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Can We Free Bear #134?

The HSUS has contacted Dan Sholly, chief ranger of Yellowstone National Park, and asked that he consider our proposal to release Bear #134 in another national forest with a viable grizzly population, such as Glacier National Park. We have also contacted Washington State University and asked for its endorsement of such a plan. We are researching the possibility of mounting a legal challenge to the NPS's current management plan for Yellowstone. Our contention is that the plan is in direct violation of the legislative intent and directive governing the establishment and continued operation of Yellowstone National Park. ■