

Grizzlies are worth millions to local economies

By Jim Laybourn

As a lifelong hunter I have always felt a special feeling as fall approaches and a primal urge to pursue and stalk game starts to dominate my thoughts.

When the weather begins to change, so does the kind of visitor that arrives in Jackson Hole. The bustle of tourists from around the world who come to experience the natural wonders of our valley slows to a trickle and hunters begin to arrive. We have to become more consistent about how these very different visitors interact with our bears.

A new study on bear jams in Yellowstone has finally documented what a powerful draw bears are to tourists. Amazingly, 99 percent of YNP visitors said they expected to see a bear on their trip and 67 percent actually did. Of the visitors surveyed who did not see a bear, 65 percent were disappointed that they did not see one and over 60 percent of all visitors surveyed said that bear viewing was a "very important" part of their decision to visit Yellowstone.

Roughly 10 percent of the visitors surveyed said they would visit less frequently if roadside bear viewing was not a possibility. That has been quantified to a reduction of \$10 million dollars less in tourism revenue regionally each year!

While the survey was for YNP, it's reasonable to assume the findings can be applied to GTNP, since each park gets many of the same visitors.

Each grizzly bear is worth millions of dollars over the course of their life in our tourism economy. The number of wooden bears, bear logos and the wide variety of bear souvenirs for sale here prove that we all know the commercial value of grizzly bears.

It is simply negligent for management agencies to suggest that another seven grizzlies can die needlessly in the next nine years in this valley, due to hunter-bear conflicts. That is the latest, revised number the US

Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that protects grizzlies, has approved.

Bears are an extremely valuable public resource that must not be squandered. Our world-famous Grizzly 399 should die naturally of old age, with a legacy of generating tens of millions of dollars in tourism over her lifetime, not killed in a moment of panic. .

I have had many encounters with grizzly bears during the last ten years while hunting in the Teton Wilderness, but have never had to shoot a bear. We have had grizzlies come toward us while field dressing a kill, prowl around our camp, follow us while hunting at a distance, rattle our bear boxes at night and come to us while we were bugling to elk. Last fall, I had a close encounter with a grizzly at dawn while deer hunting. It was exciting for sure, but no need to overreact. I talked calmly to the bear while backing away with my bear spray in hand, and soon we parted ways. Just because I was carrying a rifle capable of killing the bear and I was feeling a rush of adrenaline did not give me the right to take it's life. Yet, this is exactly how many bears die.

It was a failure of leadership that killed the grizzly at Schwabacher's Landing in GTNP on Thanksgiving Day, 2012. I was there. Park rangers had told me the male grizzly and other bears had been seen numerous times in the area, and I even saw the bear myself. Wyoming Game and Fish Department wardens were well aware of the bears in the river bottom and the presence of carcasses, as were most hunters in the area. After the shooting, one upset hunter told me that he had warned the hunters involved in the bear's death not to go down into the dark timber because there had been close encounters in previous days. His warning was ignored. No official in charge, knowing the well-documented dangers of grizzly bears on carcasses, thought it was more important to protect an officially threatened species and close the area than to kill a handful of elk.

It has become obvious that there is no longer a legitimate need to hunt elk inside GTNP. Park elk numbers are very close to their management goal. I am opposed to the senseless and unnecessary killing of grizzly bears by hunters who are unfamiliar with the habits of grizzly bears and

who often panic at the sight of a bear while hunting. The hunt in the park allows hunters who likely have little or no understanding of grizzly bears to hunt elk in an environment where they are very likely to encounter grizzlies.

It is the responsibility of our state and federal wildlife managers to do much more to protect our precious grizzly resource. They need to require all hunters to carry bear spray, expand educational efforts, and, above all, end hunting in the park.

Let's be proactive and make sure that our fall visitors continue to have safe adventures in our area, and that no more of our valuable grizzly bears are killed out of fear, ignorance, or lack of the appropriate deterrent.

Jim Laybourn is a lifelong Wyoming resident, hunter and videographer who spends many days in the park each year.