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OUR VIEW

Post Register editorial board members are
Jerry M. Brady, publisher; J. Robb Brady;
Marty Trillhaase; and Dean Miller.

A whistle-blower's warning

The number of Yellowstone National Park grizzly bears shot outside the park has grown steadily in the last 15 years, up to 16 in 2000. But few people noticed until Yellowstone National Park backcountry Ranger Bob Jackson put it on the nation's radar screen.

Jackson is the whistle-blower who complained about the dubious hunting practice of shooting elk around salt licks and baiting stations. He led the crusade to reduce hunter-related grizzly bear killings on the park's borders.

Yellowstone Park officials tried to impose a gag order on Jackson. The National Park Service says it was a question of protocol. Jackson didn't speak for the park on the issue, they said. Trouble is no one at the state or federal level was paying attention.

For instance, the U.S. Forest Service sat on this problem for years. Back in 1988, former Forest Service Ranger Don Hooper did his own shouting about illegal salt licks in the Teton Wilderness luring grizzlies out of Yellowstone Park.

It's now 13 years later and the Forest Service has just begun to respond to this violation of wilderness laws with increased patrolling, added hunter education and a survey of salting sites. A shocking 36 illegal salt licks in the wilderness were identified in that survey. That's unpardonable bureaucratic neglect for more than a decade.

Just as bad is the record of Wyoming's Fish and Game Department. Specialists working for that department still question whether salt licks can be linked to luring bears to their deaths. But where there are salt licks, there are usually elk — and the carcasses of these animals attract grizzlies.

Wyoming Fish and Game also isn't making a serious effort to enforce its new law making hunting over salt licks illegal.

The state has long tolerated feeding thousands of elk each winter at Jackson Hole, thereby concentrating too many elk at park borders instead of dispersing the animals among badly needed new winter range.

Wyoming has a big financial stake in commercial outfitters who have long favored bait hunting for their inexperienced clients. So the state prefers to deny a problem exists.

Indeed, the state's solution to the increased number of grizzly bears inside the park and in the recovery zone outside the park since 1980 is removing the bear from the federal Endangered Species List.

Two years ago, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team confirmed a growing number of confrontations between grizzlies and hunters. Its chairman, U.S. Geological Survey biologist Charles Schwarz, believes states should consider a mandatory rule arming all hunters with pepper spray.

Here are some other solutions:

- Police baiting sites.
- Mark all salt lick sites in and out of wilderness and enforce fines and bounties on violators.
- Disperse hunter camps.
- Enforce state rules against "quick quartering" where too much of the wasted game meat is left for the bear.

The onus is on states and hunters to prove that they can develop rules and hunting conduct that preserves both grizzlies and fair hunting opportunities. Until there's some common ground about how and where to hunt around the park, both grizzlies and hunters need a truce.

J. Robb Brady

Trillhaase
J.R.B.