



Board of Review

Grizzly Bear Family Removal August 17, 2009

Oldman Lake Drainage

Glacier National Park

Recommended: *Dona L. Rutherford* Date: *3-18-2010*

Dona L. Rutherford

St. Mary District Ranger, Glacier National Park

Approved: *MAF* Date: *3/18/10*

Mark Foust

Chief Ranger, Glacier National Park

Approved: *Charles J. Potter* Date: *3/18/2010*

Jack Potter

Chief of Science and Resources Management, Glacier National Park



Board of Review Members

Ben Bobowski, Chief of Science and Resources Management, Rocky Mountain National Park
(Facilitator)

Chas Cartwright, Superintendent

Stephanie Dubois, Deputy Superintendent

Mark Foust, Chief Ranger

Jack Potter, Chief of Science and Resources Management

Kyle Johnson, Wilderness Specialist

Amy Vanderbilt, Public Affairs Officer

Chuck Cameron, Park Ranger

Pat Navaille, Walton/Two Medicine District Ranger

Barry Wollenzien, Park Ranger

Patrick Suddath, Branch Chief of Ranger Activities

Gary Moses, Lake McDonald District Ranger

John Waller, Wildlife Biologist (Carnivore)(on the telephone)

Dona Rutherford, St. Mary District Ranger

Deb Hervol, recording



Background and Findings

The board of review for the grizzly bear family removal action convened on Thursday, November 19, 2009 at 10:00 a.m. at Park Headquarters. The Board of Review was facilitated by Ben Bobowski, Chief of Science and Resources Management at Rocky Mountain National Park.

The board reviewed the incident reports filed by the rangers involved in the management action, Glacier National Park's Bear Management Guidelines, details leading up to the final removal decision, darting and removal of the cubs, and the relocation of the surviving cub.

BACKGROUND:

After attempting for several years to aversively condition a grizzly sow (and, over the years, her 2 family groups) frequenting the Cut Bank, Dry Fork and Nyack Creek drainages and accompanying backcountry campgrounds, park management decided to remove the grizzly family group from the ecosystem. Managers deemed the group to be conditioned to humans and that the continued behavior exhibited by the family group following years of aversive conditioning represented a threat to park visitors. The female grizzly was killed in the field, and the yearling cubs were darted with the intention of capturing and relocating them to a zoo. One of the cubs did not survive the darting process.

Starting in the 1990's there was documentation of bear issues in Oldman Lake and Morning Star Lake campground areas. No bears were collared nor was genetic identification available at that time. These were visual and anecdotal observations only. In 1996 the park received specific reports of a female which seem to match later descriptions of the female grizzly involved in this action.

In 2004, the Park received reports of a grizzly female and 2 cubs of the year that were approaching campers in the food prep area of Morning Star Lake Campground (MOR). A review of the Bear Information Management System (BIMS) reports from 2004 indicated that these bears were exhibiting behavior that indicated they were comfortable near humans and would not defer to humans. Specific reports indicated that they had encountered visitors along the trail at close range (within 30') without moving away. They had encountered a group of 8 people on a trail, forcing them off trail, even though the visitors had been making noise to scare the bears off. In another incident the bears had again entered the food prep area of MOR and, after campers backed away, had rummaged through bags. Campers stated that the bears did not obtain any food. In another report from the MOR area, a grizzly family group was reported within 20 feet of the cooking area, and there was a report of a bear slobbering on tents. Managers collared the sow in the field, and initiated documentation of the bear's movement and behavior. It was noted that the sow's range of territory included most of the Two Medicine area; Dry Fork, Oldman Lake, Over Pitamakin Pass, upper end of Morning Star drainage, Nyack, Cut Bank, and Atlantic Creek.

In 2005, reports of similar behaviors were received early in the season. In the first recorded encounter, the bears walked by the food prep area at MOR, while visitors attempted to chase them out. The bears were described as very unresponsive to noise including the sound of a tarp being flapped in the bears' direction.

During the month of July, 2005, 4 other reports were received. In one, bears approached hikers having lunch on the shore of Oldman Lake. When the hikers backed away, the bears batted around packs and chewed on a fishing pole. Visitors reported that no food was obtained by bears. In another incident, a ranger had bears walk parallel to him while he was on trail, approximately 15' away. The park also had a 2nd hand report of a bear sniffing a tent zipper in the middle of the night at Morning Star Lake campground, and received a report from a horse party of 6 that described being approached by a sow at very close range.

Park Managers in 2005 analyzed three possibilities available to them within Glacier National Park's Bear Management Guidelines; no action, removal, or aversive conditioning. Aversive conditioning was selected and initiated. Park managers elected to attempt an intensive, concentrated effort as an experiment to evaluate aversive conditioning efforts in a backcountry setting. Intensive targeted aversive conditioning was not widely utilized in backcountry areas up until the time of this action. Morning Star and Oldman Campgrounds were closed for 2-3 weeks while Wind River (Carrie Hunt and her Karelian bear dogs, Aug. 2005) were brought in. Hunt's report at that time recommended taking a more dominant stance with the lowest impact, not necessarily utilizing hazing rounds. Hazing was described as opportunistic during this time.

On 4/4/2006 Park Carnivore Biologist John Waller requested a peer review of a draft action plan for handling the Oldman Bear from Dr. Chris Servheen, USFWS; Rick Mace, Research Biologist; MFWP and Kerry Gunther, Bear Biologist, Yellowstone National Park. In that peer review all three indicated that they were uncomfortable with the bear's behavior, stating that the situation was serious and human safety risks were too high. In addition, the overall effectiveness of Hunt's Karelian Bear Dog (KBD) operation in the park was questioned.

In 2006, monitoring continued of the female grizzly while both Oldman Lake and Morning Star Lake campgrounds remained closed from 6/6/06 through 11/20/2006. Ranger patrols and visitor encounters, as documented by the park's Bear Information Management System (BIMS) were too few to accurately measure the bear's behavior (campgrounds remained closed) but the reports generally indicated that the bears displayed either desired or neutral behavior. The park sought a grant from the Glacier Fund and brought Hunt back in August for another intensive aversive conditioning session targeting the sow and her cubs. At this time, there was still no definitive proof that the bears had or had not received a food reward nor had there been "aggressive" behavior toward humans. This operation lasted 20 days and was deemed successful by participants. News releases were issued during this time, alerting the public to the park's actions.

In 2007, rangers recorded several events related to the sow and her cubs. On 5/28, Oldman Lake and Morning Star Lake Campgrounds were closed to safeguard the public for a planned continuation of aversive conditioning efforts. By late June, numerous reports of a grizzly family group around Oldman Lake had been received, including a report of a single grizzly bear approaching a ranger at Oldman Lake resulting in trail posting. Oldman Lake campground was again closed due to a report of a bear sniffing around a tent site. On August 25th, NPS bear-trained rangers encountered a collared grizzly bear at close range on the trail at the outlet of Pitamakin Lake and despite verbal techniques, holding the trail and (attempting) to shoot rubber bullets at the bear, it did not quickly leave the trail/area or go into cover. The ranger wrote in the report that "the sow has an extreme comfort level amongst humans".

In July of 2008, a sub-adult bear was spotted in the Morning Star Lake area. Rangers speculated that it may have been one of the cubs of the sow that had been the target of aversive conditioning in previous years (this was never proven). In early summer, rangers received a report of a bear destroying a tent and sleeping bag in the Oldman Lake CG. Photos and video were taken of the bear but were not high enough

quality to positively identify the bears involved. Oldman Lake campground was posted for much of September due to multiple sightings, including bears in the food prep area. Managers believed that the sightings were of three different bears.

On July 10, 2009, the first incident of the year of a female grizzly and two yearlings was reported at Morning Star Lake campground. Two cubs had gone into a tent site and sniffed at backpacks. The sow remained 15 feet away from the reporting party and appeared very agitated. The cubs appeared curious and unafraid. On July 11 the family group was observed across the lake at Morning Star Lake campground, but did not enter the campground. On July 12 the family group passed close to the campground. One cub entered the campsite and approached the tent doors of one of the campers while the sow was close enough to react to shutter noise from the pictures being taken by visitors. Rangers began intensive monitoring of the area. Rangers recorded multiple sightings of the bears in and around the campground. On July 20, two rangers monitoring the area encountered the sow and cubs. In their report of the incident, they described the bear's behavior as "purposefully approaching" the rangers, even after they had "given up ground" to the bear.

Managers met in a series of meetings to discuss the history of the bears and the behaviors they continued to exhibit. Managers initially deemed that they would re-collar the sow and continue to gather information on her movements. Rangers and biologists successfully captured and collared the sow on July 27. The bear's identity was confirmed by locating the identifier chip previously placed in 2004. Following the capture, managers learned that the GPS collar placed on the sow did not provide the information that managers expected. Managers convened a second meeting on August 7. Managers decided at this meeting that the collected behaviors of the bears indicated that the bears were conditioned, which warranted their removal per the park's Bear Management Guidelines. Managers decided that the sow would be removed from the population, and that the park would attempt to capture the cubs, and move them to a zoo. The plan was reviewed and sanctioned by the Fish and Wildlife Service's Northern Rockies Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, who also agreed to coordinate the placement of the cubs into a zoo.

Several attempts were made by park staff to locate the sow and cubs over the following week and a half, without success. On August 17, the bears were located using telemetry near Old Man Lake. It was the first confirmed sighting of the group in the Old Man Lake area in 2009. Rangers were able to quickly intercept the family group as they moved in the direction of the occupied campground, and shot and killed the sow, 300 yards out of the campground. Rangers darted the cubs immediately following the removal of the sow. One of the cubs did not survive the darting process. The surviving cub and the bodies of the other bears were flown out of the park's backcountry via helicopter. The two deceased bears were transferred to the state wildlife laboratory for necropsy. The surviving cub was taken to West Glacier to await transfer to the Bronx Zoo. The surviving bear was transferred to the Bronx Zoo on August 27th.

BOARD OF REVIEW DISCUSSIONS:

The Board of Review examined the decision to remove the bear, the field actions taken leading up to the removal, the removal operation, and the events surrounding the transfer of the surviving cub to the Bronx Zoo.

The board started with a review of the case incident record, timeline of events, discussion, and a question and answer period about the incident. Several lessons learned were identified for removal operations, darting and relocation of cubs, communications, and record keeping.

The board affirmed the long realized understanding that grizzly bear removal decisions are critical and require great scrutiny.

BOARD OF REVIEW FINDINGS:

1. The decision to remove the family group was appropriate under Glacier National Park's Bear Management Plan and Guidelines.
2. The rangers involved in the removal of the sow acted professionally and within the scope of their duties.
3. The actions taken were within the existing skills and training of the persons selected to carry out the action. Team selection was appropriate for the operation.
4. The operations team conducted safe operations with the available tools.
5. The actions taken during the darting of the cubs were appropriate and within existing guidelines. The darting operation was properly executed. Equipment was properly utilized, and procedures were appropriate for the circumstances. The death of the cub was unintentional and difficult to prevent. The unfortunate death of the cub was the result of the bear's movement and position following the darting, that caused the dart to open the jugular vein of the animal and cause its death. There was no negligence in the placement of the dart.
6. The relocation of the surviving cub was drawn out and plagued with difficult communications with the receiving facility. The difficulty of the process added additional stress on the animal and staff.
7. Campers in Oldman Lake Campground were not notified of the action either before or after the removal operation. Several campers witnessed the operation with no explanation from the NPS. A plan to contact campers was formulated, but not executed.
8. Communications between the contract helicopter and field operations staff was not adequate.
9. Management took multiple steps to communicate the decision and the particulars of the removal action to park staff, however, park staff were not satisfied with the level of internal communication.

BOARD OF REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. In every operation, prepare for and assemble the right people with the right skill sets for the field operations. Every aspect of the operation should be considered, including incident management, aviation, and bear management.
2. Consistently evaluate closure decisions with updated information. The decision to keep Oldman Lake campground open was discussed and made with regard for the sow's known locations in 2009. This type of decision should be re-evaluated as the operation continues, taking into consideration all new information, such as success in locating with telemetry, time since last sighting, probability and risk of the bears moving into other drainages.

3. Every effort should be made to inform people in campgrounds and along trail of our actions (before, if possible).
4. Continue to develop skill sets needed for emergency situations; aviation management skills, skills in all aspects of wild life management, including tactics for removal operations.
5. An NPS handheld radio should be provided to the contract helicopter for park operations. The contract helicopter has no radio communications if it is shut down.
6. The cubs were carried in the field on the shoulders of staff, without carrying devices. Procedures should be implemented regarding carrying wildlife safely.
7. Use Operational Leadership, specifically, Operational Risk Management tools to analyze operations. The green, amber, red and the severity, probability, exposure analyses are viable tools.
8. Work on seasonal hiring and ensuring the skills sets of our seasonal workforce. Seek candidates that have advanced Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA's) including advanced outdoorsmanship skills, aviation skills, etc. Identify ways to develop skills within the seasonal staff.
9. Evaluate Firearms Policy for future training to do the job effectively. Define job expectations better, to include the full range of wildlife management actions. Consider using hunter education simulations to learn where shots should be placed.
10. Insure clarity in Incident Command structure when transition is made to another team, incident commander, or operations section chief. Insure operational briefing is thorough and accurate.
11. Revise the Bear Management Plan and Guidelines to clarify definitions: i.e., hazing, aversive conditioning, habituated, conditioned, etc.
12. The current action matrix language does not exactly match the text in the Plan. Actions need to be clearly defined as well as conditions of each incident. The text needs to be reviewed to match the working matrix currently in use.
13. Use the State of the Backcountry Report to review and assess activities in each campground as it pertains to wildlife interactions. Campsite location and layout should be evaluated as to how it contributes to wildlife interactions.
14. Improve how we track management actions related to individual animals and not just general reports. The BIMS program should be updated to improve such tracking capabilities.
15. Develop better communications between bear managers within the Park to ensure specific bears are tracked and incidents recorded.
16. The park should continue to examine ways to improve internal communications when controversial decisions are made. The all employee meetings held after the action were well received.
17. An annual report should be produced that summarizes wildlife management actions.