



BY CONNOR SHEA

County Commissioner Mike Whitfield waits to speak with Dr. Chris Servheen after Servheen's presentation last Wednesday night.

Bear awareness meeting strikes a cord with local community

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On Wednesday, April 26th the Seniors West of The Tetons dining hall was filled, to the brim, with area residents preparing to hear a very timely message regarding Grizzly bears and human-bear conflict.

The presentation was organized by a group of concerned residents who mostly live in the North Leigh Creek area of Teton Valley.

Residents around that neighborhood became deeply angered and passionate about the euthanization of a Grizzly sow and her two cubs in the area last November by Idaho Fish and Game.

Resident (and retired long-time Idaho Fish and Game naturalist) Mike Abbott began the meeting by thanking SWOT and giving his perspective on the incident last fall, which happened "a quarter mile"

from Abbott's house.

"I'm talking about her because she demonstrates the things that we need to pay attention to going down the road," said Abbott. "She never got into any trouble as far as I could tell, other than the fact that she made some people nervous."

"I don't really think she was that tolerant of humans. Nobody along North or Middle Leigh saw her, besides once in the middle of the night. She was nocturnal. I think she liked the wildlife corridors and all the natural food sources that go along there," said Abbott.

Abbott maintains she was simply trying to "bulk her cubs up" and had "never gotten into any garbage". Abbott didn't know the bear had been destroyed until reading an ID F&G press release.

"They did go around warning

everybody when the bear was out there and I thought that was awesome. We were excited to have her come down and visit," said Abbott. "It wasn't a big hassle. A sow with cubs is nothing to trifle with. We were ok. We knew she would eventually move out."

After the incident Abbott and every one of his neighbors he talked to were distraught.

"We felt like this was an overreaction. Their reasoning was public safety, you can always use that, but there is a big difference between public fear and what we saw, agency fear," said Abbott.

More understanding of grizzlies will be key to managing conflicts with the growth of the valley considered.

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"The most important thing is to understand these bears so we can respect them, but not have unwarranted fears. We know there are more bears, we know they are coming down in the future, and we know there are more houses being built right in the wildlife corridors. That's the recipe for conflict," said Abbott.

Abbott also hopes to parlay the efforts into more consequential action, even mentioning some inroads taken with the county government, potentially creating a county bear ordinance (for attractant security) and creating a bear overlay map for the county GIS systems.

That is why the small unofficial group, christened Teton Valley Bearwise by Abbott, arranged to have Dr. Chris Servheen come down to Teton Valley from Missoula, MT, to give a presentation to residents and interested parties.

Servheen is a grizzly bear recovery expert, having served with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for over 35 years. Servheen is currently the President/Board Chair of the Montana Wildlife Federation and also does extensive bear-focused work with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Servheen started his presentation off with an overview of the grizzly bear, describing its species characteristics. He then talked at length about the species' history, including its near-extinction during American expansion and the different population groups located through the lower 48 states and southwestern Canada.

Servheen then went on to discuss the current status of grizzly bears, especially focusing on their recovery after being listed as an endangered species (in the lower 48 and Canada) in 1975 during the creation of the endangered species act.

That status held until July 2017, when the US Fish and Wildlife Service "delisted" the bears.

That decision came with much controversy, particularly in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) and Idaho and Wyoming, which had to cancel hunts for Fall 2018 after a federal judge restored those protections.

According to the National Park Service, in 1975 there were only estimated to be 136 bears in the GYE. In 2021, due to strict regulations prohibiting Grizzly hunting in the GYE, that estimate had grown to 1,063 bears.

"The recovery is built on science and facts, and that has been the fundamental reason why we have done so well," said Servheen. "Today we have grizzly bears all over the system. We have come a long way."

While illegal hunting and, interestingly, wolf trapping (bears getting maimed by snares intended for wolves), remain a top concern for bears out in the wilds, development in bears' territory and human backcountry encroachment (including sharing locations on social media) are more subtle (but equally as dangerous) ways bears are coming under threat.

"If we're not careful, we are going to lose the very things that bring people here. The reason that we are all here. The reason you people live here. We can't whistle past the graveyard and put it on the new people coming. We all have an effect," said Servheen.

"The overlap of more bears and more people requires people to be more bear aware when living in bear country. You have to be more careful about what you do when living in bear country," said Servheen. "This is what we call the leading, bleeding edge of bear management."

Rounding out this point, Servheen went on to stress that conservation easements (where private landowners designate wildlands to never be developed, in perpetuity) were invaluable and "critical."

Servheen then went on to explain proper bear conflict mitigation techniques, such as securing attractants such

as garbage bins, birdfeeders, chicken coops, and gardens.

Techniques discussed included using bear-proof bins for trash, using height and distance allotments for bird feeders, and using fencing (both electric and metal) for coops, dumpsters, and gardens. Fenced-in areas should not be accessible from any side, including the overhead sections.

Bear safety techniques were also discussed including making noise and traveling in groups when recreating, avoiding traveling at night, and "always, always" carrying bear spray in an accessible spot.

"Bear spray works," said Servheen. "Practice using it, practice taking it out and taking the safety off, and practice spraying it down. It comes right up off the ground and hits them in the face."

After the presentation, and a very great question and answer session, Servheen was impressed with what Abbott and fellow concerned residents are starting.

"The future of grizzly bears is not only based on the agencies, it's going to be based on the people that live, work, and recreate in bear habitat. Those people need to be key to the bears' survival. They need to be aware of bears. They need to know how to live with bears. They need to speak up about the needs of bears and the fact that all these people here in this area are so interested is just wonderful," said Servheen.

In conclusion, Servheen mentioned that perhaps the most critical thing to do is accept that bears are around and an integral part of the place that we live in.

"You have to tell people, because then everybody becomes more bear aware," said Servheen. "The fact that, you know, the bears are here and we live among them. We have to do the right things. Pretending they're not here, to protect them, is not going to protect them. It's not going to be good. We need to be speaking up and we need to be aware of bears and we all need to be part of the solution."