

Grizzly bears are sacred to Native Americans who want them protected

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.30.15

Word Count **809** 7



A grizzly bear cub eats apples in a tree a few miles from the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, Montana, Sept. 25, 2013. Photo: Alan Rogers/The Casper Star-Tribune via AP

BILLINGS, Mont. — American Indian tribes in the Western United States are fighting to protect grizzly bears. The bears are very important to their culture. Native American tribes are challenging attempts by federal wildlife officials to end legal protections for the bears, which roam the wilderness in and around Yellowstone National Park. The tribes are concerned hunters will kill the bears, which they believe are sacred.

The tribes' opposition is the latest chapter in the history of these huge, ferocious animals. Grizzlies almost ceased to exist in the early 1900s because hunters had trapped and killed so many of them. The tribes' opposition adds something new to the debate about how to treat these bears. Now the Native American culture is involved in the discussion, not just scientific facts.

"Uncle" Grizzly Is Important Member Of Family

Ben Nuvamsa, a leader of Arizona's Hopi Tribe, says his people see the grizzly bear as an "uncle" who has strong healing powers. The grizzly plays a central role in traditional ceremonies.

"We regard him as part of our family, and it's really important to all of us natives to keep him around," Nuvamsa said. "It doesn't matter where the bears are. We pray to them when we see them."

U.S. wildlife officials, and wildlife officials for the states of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, say the 700 to 1,000 bears in the region are not endangered. These government officials have been pushing for almost 10 years to reverse the animal's threatened status. The legal status of a species of animal creates rules about how they can be treated.

Endangered Status Is In Question

The government gave the grizzly bear a non-endangered status in 2007. But the decision was reversed by a federal judge two years later.

Removing federal legal protections would allow the state governments to control how the bears are treated. State governments might decide to allow trophy hunters to hunt grizzlies. Trophy hunting is killing animals just for sport, and not for food. Many people have begun to object to this sport in recent years. But wildlife officials in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming believe hunters could help to get rid of problem bears.

Since the 2009 court ruling, government scientists have tried to further prove their ideas with new research. They say that the bears' food supplies are not threatened by climate change and other factors. They have also promised that some protections of the bears' territory would stay in place no matter what legal status the animals have.

A decision on whether to propose a rule to remove protections for the bears is expected in the next several months.

Respecting The Land, Animal Connection

There have been increasing numbers of conflicts between bears and humans in the 19,000-square-mile Yellowstone Park region lately. The attacks make the upcoming decision even more complicated.

Since 2010, grizzlies have killed six people in and around Yellowstone. They regularly attack hunters and domestic livestock outside the park. These events have fueled opposition to continued protections for the bear, within the ranching industry and among state officials.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Serena Baker says the agency will consider both the concerns of the tribes and scientific evidence. The grizzly bear population has grown larger in the Yellowstone area since protections were begun in 1975.

When officials decide if a species is protected by the Endangered Species Act, they use what the law sees as the "best available science." But Baker said the tribes' views would also be considered.

"They have a very deep connection to the land and the animals and the environment," she said. "We certainly want to respect that."

Taking Treaties Into Account

Yet leaders of dozens of Native American tribes, most of them in the Western United States, have asked for the process to be stopped.

They say they have not been formally consulted about what will happen to the bears. There are long-standing treaties, or official agreements, between the tribes and the U.S. government that require that the tribes be consulted about these matters. Previous White House executive orders require this as well.

Grizzly bears lived across much of the West until hunting and trapping made them disappear from most of their historic range in the United States.

"These are our treaty lands, our ancestral homelands," said Lee Juan Tyler, a leader of the Shoshone Bannock Tribes. "We want the grizzly bear protected with those lands, and the grizzly bear returned to areas where we can co-manage them."

Federal officials say they have spoken to five tribes in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. Talks with two other tribes are planned. Baker said letters have also been sent to more than 50 tribes inviting them to join the process.

"We need to hear from them on when and where we can meet, because we are ready to meet at any time," Baker said.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the information in the article, what could be an unintended effect of no longer protecting grizzly bears from hunting?
- (A) increased grizzly bear attacks
 - (B) overwhelming numbers of hunters
 - (C) mass migration of grizzly bears to other states
 - (D) the grizzly bear again becoming endangered

- 2 Which paragraph in the section "Respecting The Land, Animal Connection" explains why Native American perspectives should be taken into account when making the decision about protecting grizzly bears?
- (A) paragraph 1
 - (B) paragraph 3
 - (C) paragraph 4
 - (D) paragraph 5

- 3 Read the following sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].

Grizzlies almost ceased to exist in the early 1900s because hunters had trapped and killed so many of them.

Why is this sentence included in the article?

- (A) to persuade readers that hunting is negative
 - (B) to explain the problem that the law is trying to address
 - (C) to explain why grizzly bears have been protected from hunting
 - (D) to persuade readers that grizzly bears no longer need protection
- 4 Read the section "Taking Treaties Into Account." Which statement accurately reflects the perspective of the Shoshone Bannock Tribes?
- (A) The grizzly bear should increase in population and in range.
 - (B) The grizzly bear is a dangerous enemy to people and livestock.
 - (C) The proposed change in law must consider the scientific facts above all else.
 - (D) The proposed change in law would drastically reduce the grizzly bear population.