

Losing Wildness

How an unhealthy region is healing itself

By Brady Wolff

After a wonderful dinner of black bean soup atop Jumbo Pass in southeastern British Columbia, I feel a lump in my throat. I check my glands like my mother taught me: they're swollen. How could this be? It's the last week of my two month summer semester with the Wild Rockies Field Institute and I just happen to get sick!?! This was supposed to be the culminating backpack trip – the grand finale – to end the past months of wonderful adventures investigating the ways communities are responding to environmental threats in the southern Yellowstone to Yukon eco-region.

But perhaps this isn't a coincidence. Perhaps me getting sick in one of the most beautiful, wild places left on earth is symbolizing something; teaching me something I need to learn.

For now, I watch the rest of my classmates and instructors heading out for a day hike to view the nearby glaciers. As I stay back in camp, fatigued and sniffing, hoping my immune system is working, I think about the incredible experiences I've had these past eight weeks, learning about the principles of conservation biology and the actions that communities are taking to restore health and vitality to a threatened ecosystem.

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The Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) eco-region is one of the largest intact ecosystems in the world. It is one of the few remaining landscapes that still has all of the large mammals that were present here before Europeans arrived; it is truly a haven for wildness. At the same time, the health of this vast ecosystem is being threatened. Humans have laid claim to its extraordinary abundance of timber, gas, water, and vistas; putting roads everywhere we can; squeezing the land of everything it has. The ecological health and wildness that remain depend greatly on the attitudes and ethics of the people in this region, and how their land management choices work in terms of conservation biology principles.

During the rest of year, when I'm not out roaming the Rockies on a field course, I am studying conservation biology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. My instructors there and here have made it clear that conservation biology is a crisis discipline – that is, its use would not be necessary if the ecological health of a region was not already in jeopardy. Conservation biology's holistic, multi-disciplinary approach often focuses on preserving habitat and corridors for large carnivore species, in order to benefit the whole system. It is here in the Rockies that I have seen firsthand the significance of this discipline.

On this course I have learned that the abundance of the formidable grizzly bear is a useful indicator for the health and wildness in this region. Because grizzlies require large, diverse habitats, the grizzly is considered to be an "umbrella" species. Therefore its protection results in the protection of many other species found within their wide-ranging habitats. I have seen evidence of this on this backpack in the Purcell Mountain Range. As I appreciate the rare sub-alpine plants that thrive around my tent I've noticed the connection with a grizzly that passed through our camp, not 15 feet from our tents, while

we were asleep. It finally hit home that if we can preserve enough land for the grizzly, these special plants will no doubt find a home as well.

To protect these large carnivores as well as other wide-ranging mammals, many distinctive measures are necessary. Increasing connectivity between core habitats to ensure genetic and demographic exchange becomes of the utmost importance. This is because small, isolated populations of any animal cannot survive over the long term. In fact, this is one of the most critical issues threatening the southern Y2Y region.

Another key factor in preserving ecological health is determined by our ability to coexist with wild creatures – especially top predators. In this region, human-caused mortality is the number one killer of grizzly bears. My instructors assigned us to read a scientific article by bear biologist Steven Primm. Primm explains various approaches to grizzly bear conservation in the area, and says that since the early 1970's, nearly 85 percent of all radio-collared grizzlies have been killed by people.

Such high-levels of human-caused mortality prevents the grizzly population from maintaining positive growth rates and stable sizes, which ultimately makes them vulnerable to stochastic events. Primm also states that it is not just poaching or defensive killings, but that human-caused mortality is “the result of an interwoven complex of ecological, physiological, bureaucratic, economic, cultural and valuational factors.” Human-caused mortality is both a cultural and political problem, and Primm believes that technical fixes alone can't solve these problems because of their complete disregard of the human factors involved.

For those reasons, human communities and individuals throughout this region play an essential role in preserving or destroying the wildness of their local ecosystems. Collectively, these local communities play an even greater role in preserving the ecological health of the entire Y2Y region. However, coordination between regions is often lacking, and the mosaic of human interests, resources, and political jurisdictions make it difficult to preserve connectivity and promote coexistence.

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On our travels, we have seen how many communities and place-based organizations are responding to the threats to wildness and ecological health in a variety of ways. The diverse array of responses allow for specific threats and issues to be confronted directly. There are three particular areas that have resonated with me for different reasons. Their stories are inspiring and give me hope that headway is being made in preserving and restoring the health to this land.

Nearly two months ago we met with Michael Leech just outside of Yellowstone National Park in the small town of Gardiner, MT. He had recently quit a well-paying job and started up a non-profit organization called Yellowstone Country Guardians. In their mission statement, the Guardians wish to “inspire local communities to nurture the wildness and spirit of Yellowstone Country.” He said that it was his love of Yellowstone and his passion to make a difference that compelled him to take action. His

organization is working on some of the difficult challenges facing the communities in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Yellowstone National Park is roughly two million acres of the most ecologically healthy land in the Y2Y region. Its abundance of grizzly bears and other top predators make the park in some ways as wild a place you can find in North America. In fact, Leech told us that the saturation point of grizzly bears within the park boundaries has been reached. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, however, is roughly seven times the size of the park and – based on its density of grizzlies – not nearly as wild. The good news is that grizzlies and wolves pay no attention at all to the park’s arbitrary boundaries, causing a spill-over affect into the lands and communities surrounding the park. By conservation biology standards this is a good thing. However, grizzlies encounter a different kind of opposition in this landscape – an opponent that usually gets the best of them.

So, naturally, the Yellowstone Country Guardians arose to defend the wildness of the land they love. In its brochure the Guardians proclaim a wish to encourage a “new language that spreads like wildfire across the terrain of Yellowstone Country.” Through education and outreach efforts like their Bear Spray Initiative, the Guardians hope to reduce the number of human-bear interactions by providing bear education to backcountry travelers. By building bridges, nurturing relationships, and fostering commitment with local communities this organization seeks to minimize human-caused mortality and increase the connectivity from the ecological stronghold of Yellowstone National Park to other core habitat areas – with the overall objective being to secure a lasting future for wildness in this region.

This place-based organization was developed out of passion and pride for a specific place. Organized from the bottom up, it is well-equipped to deal with the particular issues threatening the region. They are confronting the problem with a force of human will and determination. Leech is incredibly hopeful that the place he loves can remain a truly wild place; a place that touches our spirit like nothing else can.

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As I continued my journey northward I found very different dynamics of community conservation action, but with some familiar commonalities. One place stuck with me, a region where two entirely different scenarios played out, each influenced by the cultures that created them.

Two hundred and fifty miles northwest of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem lies a region especially important for the conservation of grizzly bears. The Mission Mountains run north and south in western Montana for close to 100 miles. This mountain range, along with its parallel range to the east, across the Swan Valley, are essential for the north south movement of grizzly populations in the Crown of the Continent region of the southern Y2Y.

The Mission Mountains and surrounding lands are an east and west tale of two peoples. To the west of the Mission Range lies the Flathead Indian Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes. Their conservation, and preservation of wildness of the western Missions, was secured in 1982 when the Tribal Council passed an ordinance establishing the first ever Tribal Wilderness Area. The council also

designated an approximately 10,000 acre Special Grizzly Bear Management Zone, where during the summer months grizzlies gather to feed on army cutworm moth larvae. The area is completely closed to humans during those months, an act that is still completely unique in grizzly protection.

This designation as wilderness and a new grizzly protection approach spoke to the values of the tribe and their deep connection with wilderness and the bear. The decision to take such a stand was natural based on their culture and spiritual way of thinking. On the other side of the Missions however, the preservation of wildness wouldn't be so natural.

The Swan Valley region in the late 1980s was a community polarized by issues regarding conservation and resource extraction. Their town meetings were said to have not gotten much past screaming and yelling. It was the "Green Nazis vs. the Timber Brutes," said Anne, a long time resident and conservation activist, "and nothing was getting accomplished."

Finally, in the early 1990s, a committee was formed with representation from all the stakeholders: loggers, timber companies, local businesses, conservationists, and even people with second homes in the area. Their mission was to confront the polarization in the community, as well as make some critical decisions to move the region forward. Bud Moore – now 91 – who we had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with, was a founding member of the committee. He said that there was no use in fighting anymore – collaboration was the only way to get things done. The committee focused on listening to each other and in finding common ground. Over several years trust was built and things began to happen more quickly. Because of the Endangered Species Act, the grizzly bear along with the bull trout were used to make some great advances in land conservation. Tangible, on-the-ground outcomes started to become more frequent.

This collaborative effort was able to heal a torn community. It protected the Swan Valley as a refuge for the grizzly bear and wildness while also allowing human industry to continue. The need for cooperation in the Swan Valley was absolutely necessary to preserve the ecological and community health of the Valley and it was natural that a gathering of concerned residents would arise to defend the well-being of the place.

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Not far from where I sit today, on the cold, snowy, top of Jumbo Pass, is a place that has brought out the energy and passion of a determined community like no place I have yet seen. Being in the remote wild of the Purcell Mountain Range, you would not expect the deep love for place that I have seen here. Each day countless people have been hiking up past our camp to experience the spectacular views and spiritual presence of such a wild place. The grizzly that came within 15 feet of our tents one night confirmed that wildness. The battle for wildness protection is never easily won. Some are long, hard fights that begin to wear even the strongest fighters down. The battle for the Jumbo Creek Valley is one such battle.

In 1989, Jumbo Glacier Resort proposed to build a world-class ski resort in the valley and immediately received strong opposition from the majority of the community surrounding it. Being beautiful beyond comparison was not the only reason community members strongly opposed the project: it is also premiere grizzly bear habitat. So the Jumbo Creek Conservation Society was formed and began its campaign to stop the resort from being built. People from all walks of life joined the society: trappers, hunters, environmentalists, First Nations, and even local businesses. This melting pot of people involved was one reason the group has been so successful in fending off the resort for over 20 years. But even after intense campaigning and overwhelming opposition, the Jumbo Glacier Resort project is still not off the table.

Meredith Hamstead, a former town planner and current board member of the Jumbo Creek Conservation Society, has demonstrated to me how love for a place can ignite a fire of action. Like when you swallow a bug (which I have on this trip) and your reaction is immediate, so was Meredith's when she heard that a road was being built illegally up to Jumbo Glacier. She, among others, jumped to the call of distress and created a road block. She was defending the valley like she would a child. It has become a part of who she is and with every last ounce of energy she will fight for it.

Through the powers that be, the Jumbo Glacier Resort is still inching closer to becoming a reality. However, with people like Meredith, the path for them will not be easy. Out of strong love and deep connection to place, arises a force that is not easily pushed aside. Their fight is not simply about the land and the wild but rather about themselves and their children and grandchildren.

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As I look back on the examples of place-based groups responding to their own regional threats to wildness, I begin to see some commonalities. First of all, these organizations and people have a very deep passion for protecting that place and keeping it whole. By many different ways these groups express their love for the land and wildlife and are acting to preserve those objects they cherish.

I also begin to see what my cold could possibly be teaching me. I recognized that my immune response to a threat to my body's health was similar to humankind's response to the threat to the health of the ecosystem they are a part of. And just as my immune system has sent out a diverse array of antibodies to combat the pathogens that have infiltrated my system, the region's communities – through a change in human nature– have developed a diverse array of organizations or groups that are attacking the social and industrial "pathogens" that are threatening the health of their ecosystem.

I have also realized that just as my symptoms – a sore throat, fatigue, and sneezing – are not the cause of my sickness, the symptoms this region is showing – loss of wildness and the grizzly bear – is not the cause of its own sickness! The cause is something deeper. The cause of my cold is a virus. The cause of the loss of wildness is human's greed and unwise dominion over nature. Without directly saying it, these organizations, groups, and individuals are ultimately fighting against the cause.

A couple of days later, I'm back in town and beginning to feel healthy again. My immune system has worked its wonders and overcome yet another cold virus. And now, as I navigate through the hustle and bustle of Invermere, I see a new purpose in life that I never knew existed. Like an antibody, my mind is looking for my matching "pathogen" to latch on to and destroy. I am also hopeful that these community responses, deeply rooted by love and pride for place, will defeat the causes of sickness in this region and beyond.