Risk and Recreation on Wildlands – Offering a Broader Perspective – By Chip Weber 6/17/19

For several years there has been an active dialogue regarding risks associated with recreation in wildlands and concern for the safety of people who choose to do so. Much of this discussion has been focused on interactions between grizzly bears and humans when running or mountain biking on trails. There is strong and expanding interest from the public in partaking in these activities (and many others) on the Flathead National Forest and other forested public lands. There are several proposed trail additions and events on the forest that have been the subject of much discussion. Public understanding could benefit from a broader discussion around these subjects than has been occurring.

I think individual values are driving the discussion, not just for the public, but also for professional biologists I deeply respect. Biologists and bear management specialists who caution against running or mountain biking correctly base those concerns on bears' response to "prey behavior" like running or their defensive reaction when surprised by something moving quickly toward them in the woods. There is a real risk when these things occur. I would like to offer a different way of thinking about that and other risks which occur when people recreate in the woods.

There are several questions I would like to pose and, at least partially answer. First, how great are the risks of recreational activities in wildlands occupied by bears? What are the activities that pose the greatest risk and what is the relative risk of the biking and running people seem most concerned about? How do those risks compare to risks of other activities that commonly occur on the national forests? I will also offer a perspective on concerns about how these conflicts often do not go well for the bears involved.

Finally, I want to discuss how I think we should consider risks in the context of the increasing demand for recreation on public lands and direction we have as an agency to provide welcome and access to the public on their national forests. I think important value differences are generating most of the conflict around how these lands should be used.

Bears and people are increasingly coming into contact as bear populations grow, their geographic distribution expands, and people increasingly use the forests for recreation and other purposes. I looked at data on human fatalities from bear attacks available on Wikipedia that references each incident and the human activity associated with that attack. I limited my considerations to incidents occurring since 1990 because mountain biking and trail running weren't very prevalent on the landscape prior to 1990.

There have been 78 human fatalities from black bears and brown bears (which include grizzly bears) since 1990 in North America. Of those, 37% were associated with hiking or walking, 12% hunting, 4 % fishing, and 1 % tending fence on horseback. So, 54% of the fatalities were associated with slow quiet activities

The next most frequent was camping at 19 %. These attacks are often associated with food storage issues. They may occur in remote quiet settings or more noisy developed campsites, so I considered them separately. About 8% of fatal bear attacks occurred at people's homes. There were a variety of other activities that only rarely resulted in bear caused fatalities, including mountain biking 3% and running 4%. This information at least begs the question of whether limiting folks to enjoying only slow, quiet activities in areas where bears are present provides any greater safety for people or bears.

There are many steps we can take that can lower (not eliminate) risk of a bear attack. Some of these are included as guidelines or desired conditions in our Forest Plan. Specific trail locations and design, increased sight distances and bear awareness education are examples.

What is the relative risk to bears from this? The Northern Continental Divide grizzly population has steadily increased at 2-3 percent per year and their geographic distribution has doubled over a ten-year period, even as human use of the Forest has rapidly increased. Black bears continue to thrive across the landscape. Very few bears have been euthanized following conflicts with bikers or runners on trails even as compared to conflicts from other trail uses. Food conditioning conflicts remain the most common issue resulting in bears having to be removed. While it is true that individual bears can lose their lives from trail user conflicts, this is not an issue significantly affecting population growth which remains robust.

How does the risk you are exposed to in these activities compare to other recreational activities that occur on the national forests?

What about rafting, boating, swimming, or fishing? Each of these activities has broad acceptance to occur on national forests, often in very wild and remote settings. From 2005-2014, there were an average of 3,536 fatal accidental drownings (non-boating related) annually in the United States -- about ten deaths per day. An additional 332 people died each year from drowning in boating-related incidents. We do many things to try to promote water safety, but we don't tell folks to stay away from the water.

So why such a different reaction to the much lower risks from wildlife encounters? These are low probability, high consequence events. Deaths from grizzly attacks are horrific. We have a visceral response to that imagery that makes the probability of it happening seem much higher than it is. Activities like driving account for many more deaths, still, driving for pleasure is the number one recreational activity in the country. We normalize risks from these activities because accidents and deaths occur so much more frequently. For a more familiar example, people feel safer driving (fairly high risk) than flying (very low risk).

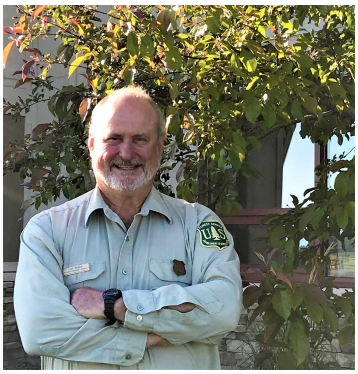
I would suggest that we consider these different activities on an equal basis in the context of their relative risks when promoting recreation on national forests and other wildlands. All of that said, I think this conversation needs to address an entirely different aspect of risk, namely, who gets to decide what risks anyone takes in their recreational pursuits. I like to make those choices for myself and I want you to be able to do so as well.

Thrill seekers enjoy activities like whitewater rafting and kayaking, rock climbing, hang gliding, downhill and backcountry skiing, and riding challenging trails. The joy of these experiences provides great quality of life for both locals and visitors. The economic benefits from this are expressed directly in local communities and indirectly by making this a desirable place to live.

How will we, as a society, decide these questions? Do we want our decisions to reflect a narrow range of values, where only a certain, few, "approved" uses of public lands may occur? As bears expand their territories, do we want to increasingly put more and more public lands off limits to recreation that comes with risks? We have a forest plan that seeks to provide the "greatest good for the greatest number", valuing all of these uses and providing places for awesome front-country uses like biking and running as well as amazing, quiet and solitude in world class wilderness. I hope we will continue to value it all.

We are continuing to bring forward projects that enhance recreational enjoyment and access on the forest. As you think about this, I encourage you to stay engaged. You can inform yourself of the risks associated with your recreational pursuits, learn how to mitigate them to the extent possible, choose what to do based on your own values and own the consequences of your choices.

I expect this debate will continue. In the meantime, we welcome you to your lands!



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