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Climate change is pissing off the bears

Posted by [Todd Hymas](#) at 2:50 PM on 17 Oct 2005

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The tragic story of [two kayakers killed this summer](#) by a hungry grizzly in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the focus of a captivating cautionary tale about global warming's effects on wildlife in the latest issue of *National Geographic's Adventure Magazine* -- like unto [Grizzly Man](#), but without the intentional disregard for sensible caution. Scarce food's been getting scarcer for caribou in the refuge and making already-hungry tundra grizzlies more and more aggressive, sometimes fatally so.

According to a 2002 U.S. Geological Survey report, increased spring snow and ice [in the Arctic Refuge] -- a paradoxical result of global warming trends -- is burying the coastal plain plants essential to caribou and grizzly diets. The caribou are decreasing in number or seeking grazing land elsewhere, and the barren ground grizzlies, bereft of this supplemental protein, have been stalking the tundra for alternatives.

And in June, one bear found an alternative in the two seasoned backcountry travelers as they slept in their tent. "The freaky thing," says area police officer Richard Holschen, "is that they did most everything right" in terms of bear-related precautions, and were killed anyway.

National Geographic also touches on the possibility of more such incidents as the Arctic Refuge has gained increasing exposure in the news. As the refuge has come closer and closer to being drilled, more and more people have been inspired to visit.

Each time the specter of Alaska oil drilling is raised in Washington, D.C., the number of visitors goes up: from 679 prior to 2000 to an annual average of 1,010 in 2004, not counting frequent trips by local indigenous people.

But the bears aren't the only ones upset by all this. Apparently, a growing number of people think [the end is more or less nigh](#).

So it looks like you're not alone thinking the world's ills get overwhelming at times. Sort of makes one want to escape to a remote wilderness somewhere ...

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Hyperbole bodes ill for Arctic Grizzlies

The notion that grizzly bears are starving in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge because of global warming is a bit far-fetched. (National Geographic Adventure, October 2005) Writer Jon Waterman would have his readers believe that grizzlies are skulking across the Arctic Refuge, just waiting to

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pounce upon the next human for a meal. This kind of hyperbole threatens the very existence of wilderness and the grizzlies that reside there.

The assertion that bears spend every waking moment relentlessly hunting down and consuming every available scrap of food is pure exaggeration. Waterman's morbid fascination with carrying a loaded pistol (or, as the sport hunters say, "packing heat") exudes the scare mentality of magazines like Sports Afield or Field and Stream. To say that wilderness guide Robert Thompson has "managed" to guide without killing a bear for five seasons is to assert that the need to kill a bear arises with some regularity. To the contrary, the wise and prepared arctic wilderness traveler will likely "manage" to go a lifetime without the need to kill a bear.

As someone who's traveled in Alaska's wilderness since 1973, working as a backcountry ranger in six of Alaska's national parks, leading trips in the Brooks Range since 1981, and running my own wilderness expedition company, Equinox Wilderness Expeditions, (<http://equinoxexpeditions.com>) for more than 20 years, I've run into lots of bears--at least a few hundred--and I have never--not once, felt a need to raise a gun to kill a bear. I've been charged, I've awakened to find a grizzly staring at me from 12 feet away, I've even been touched by a curious polar bear. Grizzly bears, for the most part, shun humans. Countless times, I've seen a bear saunter along, catch my scent, and flee, bounding up a mountainside or across the tundra. Too, I've watched bears run full-bore towards me, stand on their hind legs for a better look, then beat a speedy retreat.

It is the very mystery and unpredictability of wilderness that we crave in our connection with the land. In Alaska, bears are, fortunately, still a large part of that equation. Waterman asserts that visitors to the Arctic Refuge are unaware of the dangers of grizzly bears, an "opportunistic predator that has come to demand more and more respect." In my experience, grizzly bears have always commanded respect, no more or less today than a thousand years ago, and recreational visitors are well aware of the dangers of bears. Grizzlies are curious and unpredictable, but they are also intelligent and wary enough to stay well away from humans for the most part. After all, humans exhibit their own unpredictability. And this is precisely the problem in wilderness--different people behave in completely different ways.

Part of the problem has to do with the ideological differences between hunters and non-hunters, Natives and non-Natives. Recreational hikers, paddlers, and natural history buffs visit the Arctic Refuge throughout June, July and August. Non-consumptive users, they are part of the world's growing watchable wildlife statistics. They travel lightly, and observe strict "Leave No Trace" principles. They come to experience wilderness and see wildlife. Come mid-August, sport hunters arrive, some accompanied by hunting guides, and others from the ranks of Alaska residents. Most are heavily loaded with gear and supplies, and alight "heavy on the land," to harvest trophy animals. In my observations over the years, hunters disregard (or ignore) of the notion that certain foods are bear attractants, and the concept of leaving the land the way you found it. I've encountered fire rings with chain-sawed logs (this in the Arctic where the only trees are cottonwoods that spill down from protected side valleys off the main rivers), burned cans, smashed liquor bottles, piles of unburied human waste, laced with toilet paper, and even animal carcasses, left by hunters.

Go to the Arctic Refuge in mid-August or September and you may cross paths with trophy hunters. This past summer, while waiting for flights out of the Inupiat village of Kaktovik, on the Beaufort Sea, I met eight hunters on the eve of the open hunting season, all waiting to fly into the Arctic Refuge to hunt Dall sheep. I met up with six of these guys later, at the end of their hunting trips. In addition to "bagging" a Dall sheep each, they'd shot two grizzlies, even though they didn't have permits to kill them.

Needless bear deaths, bordering illegal. It seems pretty obvious to me that if you kill and dress out Dall sheep and then camp in one spot for more than a day, you're bound to attract the resident wildlife. That's what happened to

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these guys. They killed their animals, then camped with them for several days. Each of the two parties killed a bear that had encroached on their camp, claiming they shot it "in defense." Alaska law states that you may kill a bear in defense of your life or property if you did not provoke an attack or cause a problem by negligently leaving human or pet food or garbage in a manner that attracts bears and if you have done everything else you can to protect your life and property. Dead animals/game meat is not considered defensible property. What else would a grizzly have been after, if not it a dead animal?

The problem with people and guns in the wilderness is that they don't know enough about bear behavior to act responsibly. Every year we lose dozens of bears when they are shot by people who do not respect them or the wilderness environment.

Gut piles left behind by recreational and subsistence hunters when they dress out an animal present an unknown danger to humans. A ready food source for the animal that finds them, they are a danger to the unsuspecting visitor who happens upon this gastronomic treasure. A grizzly lords over its food, and makes regular rounds of its home territory. If it finds a gut pile or other edible item once, it will likely return for more.

How many human sources of food did the rascal grizzly on the Hulahula encounter over the course of its seven years of life? There's more to the story than has ever been reported on Kathy and Richard Huffman's death by a grizzly bear on the Hulahula River in June. This was not a starving bear, as Waterman speculates. As Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Dick Shideler reported, the bear that killed them was seven years old and in remarkably good health. There was plenty of food in the area. Groups on the Hulahula at the same time the Huffmans floated the river encountered tens of thousands of caribou over the course of their trips. My company had a trip on the river, just a day or so downriver from the Huffmans. A healthy 7-year-old grizzly certainly had plenty of food options.

Residents of the Inupiat village of Kaktovik wondered what the Huffmans did "wrong." I contend they did nothing wrong, except camp in an area where there may have been obvious fresh bear sign.

The better question to ask is: who negatively conditioned the grizzly that killed Huffmans? Unfortunately, it is often ignorant or careless humans that set the stage for human-bear encounters. Guide Robert Thompson's attitude that bear canisters are not worth taking, and "it's no big deal for [a bear] to eat my food instead of me," threatens the very survival of grizzly bears in the Arctic Refuge. It is a huge deal for a bear to eat any human food. In fact, the real likely cause of the Huffmans' deaths was their occupation of a camp within the home territory of a bear that had been conditioned to associate people with a free meal.

Anyone who's down the Hulahula River has seen the ramshackle structures along the river - Inupiat "safety" cabins constructed on Barter Island and then dragged by snowmobile and sledge across the coastal plain and up the Hulahula to Native allotments near important subsistence spots. Take a walk (onto private land surrounded by wilderness, mind you) on these Native allotments, and you'll find trash and garbage scattered far and wide, bear paw and teeth marks on the sides of the cabins, and remains of animals. For centuries, the Inupiat ranged along the Arctic coast, traveling inland in late winter and spring to catch fish through holes in the ice on the lower Hulahula River. Traditionally, they erected temporary camps while in the area.

But in the early 1990s, thanks to a hefty state grant, the first permanent cabin suddenly appeared beside the river one spring. A hulking two-story story plywood structure, complete with windows, the cabin looms above the surrounding low-relief plain. A few years later, other cabins were sledged further up the river to the edge of Kikiktat Mountain, the last major topographic feature before the Hulahula crosses the coastal plain. While on Native allotments, they are an affront to wild wilderness, and surely represent

a culture clash. Now hunters travel to and from the Arctic Refuge on high-powered snowmobiles.

It didn't take long for the structures to fall into disrepair. The ravages of winter wind, and neglect by its collective owners have taken their toll. Over the years, subsistence hunters have left a wake of garbage, animal remains, and 55-gallon drums on the tundra. There's evidence a rascal grizzly has made the rounds, vandalizing the cabins. One cabin even shows evidence of being used as a grizzly den. Is it any wonder that the Huffmans, camped as they were between the two groups of cabins, might encounter a bear that had grown accustomed to marauding at and around the only human habitation for 50 miles? And, contrary to the reports that the Huffmans had eaten their meals far upriver before camping farther down, they had actually been camped in their location for a couple days.

It is simply NOT OKAY for a bear to get your food. Once that happens, that bear forever knows to associate food with humans. Tragic, but true: a fed bear is a dead bear. In this case, humans and bears are the losers.

In a world already so despoiled of its wild spaces and wild species, it is an honor to experience a grizzlies in the wild. They move with an elegance and dignity we have barely begun to understand. For those who travel in country yet inhabited by healthy populations of grizzlies comes a responsibility to protect them. In the Arctic Refuge, and elsewhere in Alaska, we are failing. Responsibility lies not in reliance on a large caliber pistol, but in proper conduct in their homeland.

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by [equinox](#) at [11:32 AM on 04 Nov 2005](#)

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