



SPIRIT LAKE TRIBE

OFFICE OF THE TRIBAL CHAIRPERSON

MYRA PEARSON

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For the attention of:

Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell;

Dan Ashe, Director – US Fish and Wildlife Service;

Other Parties Concerned:

The sovereignty and spiritual rights of the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe are threatened by the proposed delisting of the Yellowstone grizzly bear from Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

The Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe is one of the twenty-six Tribal Nations the federal government recognizes as having an ancestral connection to Yellowstone (“Associated Tribe of Yellowstone” – *Resources & Issues*, NPS, 2010). Ten of the identified associated Tribal Nations are from the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation), but to date none have been consulted in this process.

Federally recognized tribes have a unique nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government that requires consultation to be held at a government-to-government level; and government-to-government consultation is conducted under existing protocols and within an established framework.

Yellowstone and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is a matrix of sacred and cultural sites of great significance to the twenty-six affected tribes, and those tribes’ Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs) must be engaged in an initial process of consultation consistent with the criteria of the THPOs designated mission (Section 101(d)(2) of the National Historic Preservation Act), in addition to consultation with tribal governments (executive and legislative branches), and recognized spiritual leaders.

Chief Arvol Looking Horse, 19th Generation Keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe of the Great Sioux Nation, detailed the spiritual and ceremonial significance of the grizzly bear in Lakota, Dakota and Nakota culture in his November 2014 statement in opposition to delisting of the Yellowstone grizzly from the ESA.

The cultural, geographic and sacred landscape of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people demonstrates the cultural importance of the grizzly bear. Numerous sacred sites, along with the names of creeks, rivers and buttes, were inspired by the grizzly bear. Many of our great historical leaders carried grizzly bear names, and those traditional names are present today among families in our communities.

As Chief Looking Horse has demonstrated, the ceremonial significance of the grizzly is an ancient connection. Lakota ceremonies related to the grizzly, historically known as Bear Medicine Ceremonies, are, like all of our spiritual and religious ways, protected by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (PL 95-341-1978/PL 103-344 -1994). The Act states that laws and policies pertaining to “conservation and preservation of natural species” cannot be “passed without consideration of their effect on traditional American Indian religions.” In its attempts to delist the Yellowstone grizzly bear without regard to the religious practices of tribal people, the FWS is doing so “without consideration of their effect on traditional American Indian religions.”

Abrogation of the AIRFA threatens potentially detrimental consequences not only for our religious and spiritual rights, but the sovereignty of all of the affected Tribal Nations.

Executive Order 13175 (Nov. 6, 2000) “Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments” signed by President Clinton, and the Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies (Nov. 5, 2009) issued by President Obama, requiring a “complete and consistent implementation of Executive Order 13175,” have yet to be followed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) during this process.

Executive Order 13647 (June 2013) states, “Greater engagement and meaningful consultation with tribes is of paramount importance in developing any policies affecting tribal nations.” The proposed delisting of the Yellowstone grizzly bear affects the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe and the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people of the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation).

The Secretarial Order issued by the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Commerce pursuant to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531), established the protocols to be followed when decisions related to the ESA had the potential to impact tribes. The Order directs the FWS to “solicit traditional knowledge, and comments from, and utilize the expertise of, affected Indian tribes” during the consultation process, and “cooperate with affected tribes to develop and implement Recovery Plans in a manner that minimizes” social and cultural impacts on tribal people. In the move to delist the grizzly, this has not been followed.

Ignoring these Acts and Orders contradicts the basis of the the government-to-government relationship that exists between not only the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota Tribal Nations and the federal government, but all of the 26 Tribal Nations affected by this issue.

The Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe rejects the designation of the grizzly bear as a “trophy game animal” to be killed by big game hunters on the lands our ancestors defended. Revered spiritual leaders from the past, the likes of Black Elk and Sword, articulated the perception of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people when they said, “The grizzly bear is *wakan* (sacred).”

Today the grizzly bear survives on less than 2% of its original range, with only 2% of its historic population. There is much work to be done before the grizzly bear can be considered recovered. Many areas of biologically suitable habitat exist where the grizzly once roamed, many of them in our ancestral homelands, and the grizzly should be returned to those areas.

Tribal Nations have alternative solutions to the outdated wildlife management practice of killing. Trophy hunting sentient beings appeals only to a tiny minority of the population, a minority that is over 95% white, from high economic strata. Just as the buffalo is being returned to reservation homelands with biologically suitable habitat, some Tribal Nations with appropriate land bases have expressed a desire to develop programs to return the grizzly to their sovereign nations.

Under such circumstances, estimated carrying capacity in one ecosystem would not result in killing but relocation to ignite new populations that would realize the long-projected need for linkage zones between grizzly populations. Today, the two small island populations of grizzlies surviving in two isolated ecosystems in the lower-48 cannot be considered a recovered species appropriate for delisting and subsequent trophy hunting.

Grizzly bear management plans post-delisting should be sensitive to the cultures of the affected Tribal Nations. Rather than have the states influence grizzly bear management on tribal lands, the affected Tribal Nations should be provided with the resources to initiate their own management practices and programs that are consistent with their cultural values. By doing so, tribal sovereignty will be upheld and potential employment and economic opportunity provided.

The consultation process that is mandated by the aforementioned Acts and Orders entitles the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe (and the other nations of the Oceti Sakowin and affected Tribal Nations) to review the raw data the FWS is basing all of its conclusions upon

relative to delisting the grizzly bear. Several tribes have already called upon the FWS to release that data not only to the affected Tribal Nations, but also to independent scientists for analysis and review – the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe adds its voice to that call.

The Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe supports Chief Arvol Looking Horse’s position in opposing the removal of the Yellowstone grizzly bear from the Endangered Species Act, and we support the efforts of GOAL Tribal Coalition to protect the sacred grizzly bear and in doing so defend tribal sovereignty and spiritual rights.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Myra Pearson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Myra Pearson

Spirit Lake Tribe Chairperson



Chief Arvol Looking Horse

19th Generation Keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe
of the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota People of the
Great Sioux Nation



Statement opposing the federal government's intention to remove the sacred grizzly bear from Endangered Species Act protections and allow the states of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho to trophy hunt the Great Bear on Ancestral Lakota, Nakota and Dakota Lands, and on other traditional Tribal Homelands.

"The birth of the white ones among the *Wámakaškaŋ*, the grizzly bear with a white coat, is a message that is loud and clear for us. We are at that crossroads. Our message to those in authority needs to be equally clear and direct . . ."

the interconnectedness between all beings and all things. In our prayers we appeal to *Wakan Tanka*, the Creator, to bless the *Wámakaškaŋ*, which is part of our prayer for the health and well-being of all in this cycle of life that we live. We see this relationship with the grizzly bear and all living beings of the earth as being part of a healing process, but that is not how others see it.

We talk about harmony, balance, understanding and the sacred relationship between all things, while others talk about trophy hunting. Even the white ones that are born, the sacred messengers of *Unci Maka*, our Grandmother Earth, are being killed and will continue to be killed if this abuse is not stopped. My heart is heavy because of this. These state game commissioners, wardens and government agencies don't see the spiritual nature of this. Even when our people ask, "Why are you doing this?" they will say "It's just part of our job." These are not the words or thoughts of people connected to *Unci Maka*, but we as First Nations' people are very connected to our Grandmother Earth. I am a spiritual leader of the Big Foot Ride on which we honor the 300 Lakota women, children and elders who were murdered on December 29, 1890 at Wounded Knee. I am also a spiritual leader of the Mankato Ride that remembers the 38 Dakota people who were hung in the largest mass execution in American history that happened during Abraham Lincoln's presidency. These rides are part of the process of healing, and the Big Foot Ride began mending the Sacred Hoop. Our ancestors told that the Sacred Hoop of Life was broken when our people were massacred at Wounded Knee. This was the period when those that massacred our people also wiped out the *Wámakaškaŋ*; they wiped out the buffalo, the grizzlies and the wolves, and today that mindset is still there, that "disease of the mind." They had no place for grizzly bears then, and they have no place for them now.

The birth of the white ones among the *Wámakaškaŋ*, the grizzly bear with a white coat, is a message that is loud and clear for us. We are at that crossroads. Our message to those in authority needs to be equally clear and direct: stop the abuse and the massacre of these living beings of the earth. The *Wámakaškaŋ* have a message for the world: the grizzly bear, *Mato*, is a living spirit that is sacred.

Mitakuye Oyasin!

Chief Arvol Looking Horse
Chief Arvol Looking Horse



“The grizzly bear is a living spirit that is a part of our ceremonies and our ancestors have been using the medicine given by the grizzly bear – *Mato* – for generations.”