

Book Review

Do (Not) Feed the Bears: The Fitful History of Wildlife and Tourists in Yellowstone by Alice Wondrak Biel

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(Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006. xiv plus 186 pages, acknowledgments, introduction, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

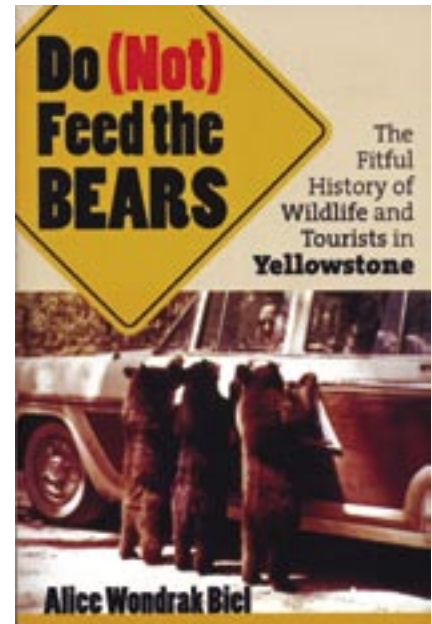
IN *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, Alice Wondrak Biel has pulled apart and illuminated layers of language, culture, and nature in a most compelling fashion. What's unique and very special about this book is the author's skillful fusion of management history, shifts in scientific perception, cultural attitudes about animals, and the changing relationship between bears and people in Yellowstone. Wondrak Biel's story highlights the shifting images of bears using scientific, official, and popular sources.

During the early days of the National Park Service (NPS), Director Steven Mather and YNP Superintendent Horace Albright made efforts to provide reliable opportunities for tourists to see wildlife. Feeding bears by the roadside was quickly established, became an institution of sorts, and was terribly difficult to change. Bear feeding began (before the NPS era) as hotels tossed out their kitchen scraps on a regular basis. These incidental feedings eventually grew into nightly "bear shows." Special amphitheatres were built, notably at Otter Creek, near Canyon Village. Nightly, bears would appear as if on cue, entering stage left

to perform their roles as entertainers for a curious and thrilled public. A ranger provided an interpretive talk as the bears consumed the edible garbage. Tourists at cabins also fed the bears, and the custom spread into auto camps and to the roadside.

Public misperception of the bear as docile and "tame" facilitated roadside feeding. That conception was created by images and a narrative about bears, from popular sources, concessioners, and the NPS, emphasizing the unusual experiences to be had in Yellowstone. Feeding the bears wasn't too risky, the rationale went, if the tourist wasn't foolish about it. The price paid for thousands of photographs of vacationers feeding bears was not only a steady stream of personal injury and property damage reports, but also a continual toll of bears removed from the park or killed in "control actions." From 1931 to 1942, 354 bears were destroyed in Yellowstone, and from 1955 to 1965, 349 bears were killed in control actions.

During the 1920s, some rationalized that only a small minority of bears "misbehaved," and if individual bears were removed, all would be well. Wondrak Biel illuminates the hubris involved in humans choosing acceptable bear behaviors while people gave or withheld food. In 1932, the National Park Service's Wildlife Division speculated that the park had a



more systematic problem. NPS officials also began to consider less artificial ways to present wildlife to the public. In 1942, with the support of biologist Olaus Murie and NPS Director Newton Drury, park Superintendent Edmund Rogers (1936–1956) ended the bear shows. Horace Albright protested, but a new interpretation of what constituted a reasonable opportunity for tourists to see wildlife won out. The author suggests a shift from "human-oriented conservation to a 'nature-oriented' preservation" was a prerequisite for shifts in bear policy (p. 49). Admitting a problem existed with bear–human relationships in the park was a significant step. Superintendent Rogers sought to shift the image of the bear away from that of picturesque highwayman, and the park began to portray bears as dangerous, going beyond the idea that the act of feeding was risky. Broadsides pictured a new and more intimidating image of a "horror" bear.

Although a system-wide prohibition on feeding animals was enacted in



Visitors at the Otter Creek bear feeding grounds, ca. 1930s.

1938, the traveling public continued to feed the bears by the roadside. Why did it take so long for the “do not feed the bears” warning to take hold? Reluctant to suggest there were hazards in traveling through Yellowstone, the park unwittingly sent mixed messages for some time. Using Yogi the Bear in 1961 as a friendly way to convey information in brochures implicitly conveyed impressions that bears were cute and reasonable creatures, hence the associated warning that bears were dangerous didn’t make intuitive sense. Visitors were “more inspired to own comic messages... than to obey them” (p. 56). Secondly, the no-feeding regulation was loosely enforced for many years. As long as the practice was widely viewed as relatively harmless, officers seemed reluctant to hamper tourists’ vacations by issuing a ticket, instead giving a warning. So many tourists were feeding the bears during the 1950s that officers only had time to ticket the most flagrant offenders. Finally, tourists just didn’t seem to comprehend the message that bears could be dangerous.

During the administration of Jack Anderson (1967–1975), the NPS put all the pieces together; information about bears must be presented often and in a variety of ways, warnings had to be very blunt, and enforcement had to be consistent and hurt people’s pocketbook. The magical “atmosphere of the roadside carnival” involved an illusion that people could be “the true

companions of wild bears,” and once the enchanting spell was broken, the habit of roadside feeding came to a rather abrupt end (p. 147). Cultural shifts in thinking about nature meant that the public was ready to give up bears that entertained (and a predictable and packaged experience) in favor of bears that were in some sense natural (and a new unpredictable kind of experience). The graphical and textual imagery of bears in NPS information portrayed a “bear of the imagination” that “wanders a landscape of the mind,” suggesting an encounter full of potentiality (p. 136–37).

This was the era when Anderson and biologist Glen Cole led NPS policymakers to the decision to close Yellowstone’s garbage dumps. John and Frank Craighead’s research in Yellowstone (1959–1971), suggests Wondrak Biel, was a “watershed of both knowledge and acrimony” (p. 76). To understand how NPS managers and the Craigheads could see the situation so differently, we must recognize “the wholly different measures by which each camp was defining success or disaster” (p. 108). The idea of an ecosystem bear replaced the notion of a Yellowstone or park bear, thanks to the Craighead’s pioneering use of radio-collars, which revealed the great distances bears traveled.

Wondrak Biel brings us up to date on the science and status of the grizzly bear, and provides insight into how the most vociferous criticisms of park

management have used the grizzly bear “as a means to tap into broader cultural attitudes about government arrogance and incompetence” (p. 131). During the superintendency of Robert Barbee, science came to compose the dominant narrative of the bear, yet “ended up being no more universally accepted than any other narrative structure in Yellowstone” (p. 133). Bears have emerged “as a component part and defining element” of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and as much as people want to see bears, a sighting is “no longer a required element of a fulfilling trip to Yellowstone” (p. 137). Wondrak Biel thoughtfully discusses today’s pressures on bears, including residential development and backcountry recreation.

Through time, Yellowstone’s visitors have sought their own visions of wild nature. The act of watching wildlife, Wondrak Biel’s readers will agree, has taken substantially new forms, involving new understandings of wildlife ecology. This nuanced, perceptive, and delightful book is a significant addition to wildlife literature and will deservedly attract a wide audience, including readers of *Yellowstone Science*.

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James Pritchard is an adjunct assistant professor with the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, Iowa State University. He is the author of *Preserving Yellowstone’s Natural Conditions: Science and the Perception of Nature*, and with Diane Debinski, the co-author of *A Field Guide to the Butterflies of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem*.