

The Influence of Social Identity on Montanans' Attitudes Toward Grizzly Bears

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Wildlife conservation and management depends on social support, often measured using attitudinal scales on surveys. In MT and elsewhere, human dimensions researchers have observed differences in wildlife-related attitudes between groups, such as hunters and nonhunters. Less studied is whether social identities associated with these groups might help explain how these attitudes form and why they differ. This presentation reports results from a structural equation model analyzing mail-back survey data from MT residents ($n=1,758$) to test how social identities affected the relationship between experiences with grizzly bears and attitudes toward the species. Our final model ($r^2=0.51$) showed the hunter identity magnified negative effects of 'vicarious' property damage (hearing of others' property damage) on attitudes toward grizzly bears ($\beta=-0.381 \pm 0.203$ [95% CI], $p<0.001$) and species acceptance ($\beta=-0.571 \pm 0.040$, $p<0.001$). These results demonstrate that in-group social interactions among hunters are the primary driver of hunters' attitudes toward grizzlies. Similarly, group dynamics among non-hunters may simultaneously lead non-hunters to disregard out-group members' negative experiences with these bears. Social identity is a powerful social force in myriad contexts and the patterns we observed here suggest wildlife conservation is no exception. Although polarization between hunters and non-hunters is currently low and overall attitudes toward grizzly bears in Montana are generally positive, differential experiences between these groups may exacerbate future divisions, particularly if negative encounters with grizzlies become more frequent. We conclude our presentation with suggestions for managers and conservationists hoping to avoid identity-related polarization with respect to grizzly bears and other wildlife species.