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The Human Dimensions of Migratory Wildlife: Documenting the Attitudes and Values of the Gateway Community Residents in Greater Yellowstone

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Yellowstone National Park is world renowned for its charismatic wildlife. In order to find sufficient forage during the winter however, many of these animals must migrate to lower elevations outside the Park. These migrations frequently bring animals into the gateway communities of Gardiner and West Yellowstone as well as onto adjoining public and private land where their presence is not always socially or politically tolerated. The conflicts involving wildlife that cross political boundaries is one of the most pressing wildlife management challenges in the Greater Yellowstone Area. National Park Service personnel are increasingly confronted with the need to understand the social context shaping wildlife conservation outside the Park and to work with other state and federal agencies who often have vastly different missions and objectives to better coordinate cross-boundary wildlife management. Yet meaningful social data on gateway community residents' tolerance for migratory wildlife is lacking. For this project, we investigated resident's experiences living with migratory wildlife, their perspectives on management and thoughts on public engagement to better understand how the community coexists with wildlife and the factors that drive tolerance for the animals.

During the winter of 2015 we conducted semi-structured interviews with residents in both the Gardiner and Hebgen Basins of Montana (Total N = 45). We utilized a chain referral sampling technique and key informants to identify potential participants. Explicit effort was made to collect as broad a representation of perspectives as possible, from a diversity of residents (e.g. landowners, community leaders, business community, other residents) and a variety of different demographic categories, including age and length of residency.

We found that the presence of wildlife in town and the valleys enhances the quality of life for many residents and is an important draw for the tourists who are the economic lifeblood of both communities. Residents usually learn to adjust their behavior or travel routes to minimize conflicts with specific species. Yet living with wildlife also creates challenges, including safety concerns for the public, domestic animals and for the wildlife, damage to private property, possibilities of disease transmission to or from domestic livestock and concerns about private property rights. Differences in resident's tolerance for the animals and perspective on how the animals should be managed can cause strong social division and political tensions that often spill over into seemingly unrelated forums or issues. Most respondents were primarily concerned with the presence and management of bison. Bison physical characteristics and behavior generated widely acknowledged safety and property concerns. Yet only residents with ties to the livestock industry or agrarian livelihoods expressed support for the current management practices including slaughter and strict limits on movement beyond the Park. I

Our findings help reveal the complex social context in which wildlife management takes place on the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. While some of the impacts to peoples lives and livelihoods that influence their tolerance for the animals can be managed with technical solutions (i.e. assistance with fencing to protect property), others are the results of systemic forces (social, political, economic and ecological) that may be difficult for wildlife managers to influence. On-going demographic and economic changes toward an amenity and service-based economy appear to influence the overall level of tolerance for wildlife in the basins but also

contribute to political polarization as well as frustrations by some longer term residents with their new neighbors over different attitudes toward wildlife. A greater understanding of this context should help managers identify how management decisions may influence tolerance for wildlife in these communities and to think about ways to design socially responsive practices.

Improvements in public engagement processes that allow people opportunity to listen to different views and to be genuinely heard by agencies and community members are also needed to help diffuse social tensions over migratory wildlife.