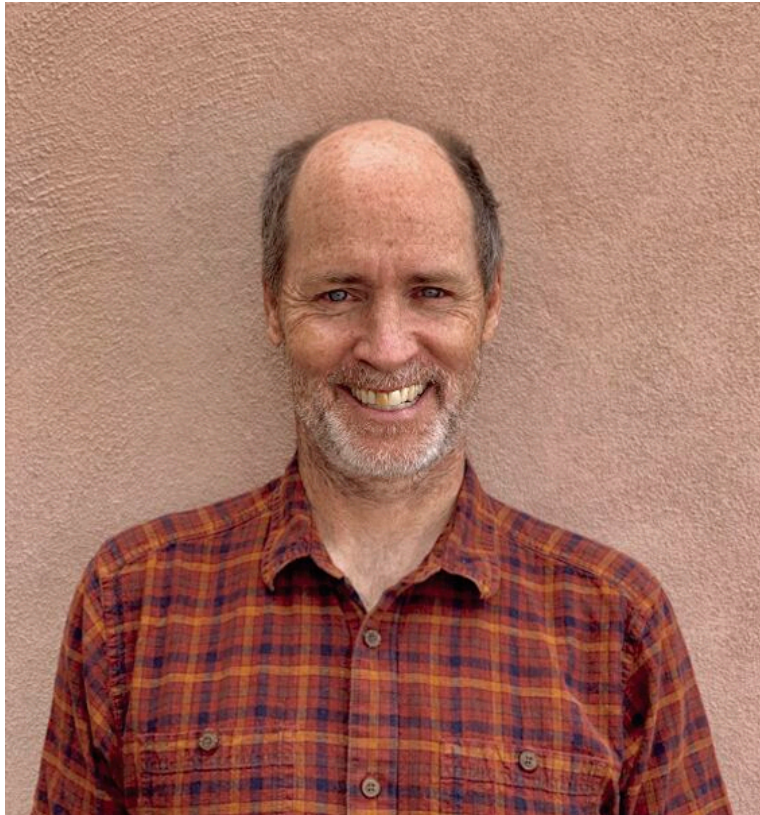


Guest Column: How to love the bear's world

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Last spring, at the height of some of the most anxiety-ridden moments of the pandemic, my father read a poem to me over the phone. He's 89 this year, and while he's vibrant and healthy I don't take for granted any opportunity to hear his voice — especially when he's reciting a poem.

The poem, Mary Oliver's *Spring*, describes the emergence of a black bear from its winter slumber. Oliver writes: "There is only one question: how to love this world."

This spring, as bruins emerged across the American West, I found myself wondering about the secret lives bears lead. As their hunger grows, do they imagine eating trout from a Rocky Mountain stream?

Is it hunger pangs or some deeper yearning - perhaps to experience the new world – that drives bears from the comfort and warmth of their dens?

I've been thinking about bears and how to love their world because bear-management-practices have been in the spotlight recently, a light that intensified after two people were killed by bears, one in Montana and one in Colorado.

The death of those people was tragic. Yet, we must remember that fatal attacks remain rare. A bear does not wake up in the morning, pack a rifle, and set out to kill a human being. Bears struggle to survive in an increasingly diminishing wild that brings them in contact with humans more frequently.

Humanity's mission, I believe, is not to kill them but to find ways to coexist.

On April 30, Montana Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte signed a bill that allows hunters to use hounds to hunt black bears in the spring, when they're with cubs and ravenous for food. This is the same governor who illegally trapped and killed one of Yellowstone's iconic wolves.

One of the bills' key sponsors, state Sen. Tom MacGillivray, offered a consistent refrain about bears: "Over the last seven, eight years we've seen a dramatic decrease in the whitetail population, and, interestingly enough, a dramatic increase in the black bear population," he said. "This bill helps to balance that out."

Not a shred of science supports this contention. There's a long-standing war on carnivores and blaming bears is a convenient excuse for what ails the deer and the deer hunter's world. In reality, a complex host of factors including habitat loss due to sprawl, climate change and other dynamics are to blame.

Meanwhile, in Colorado, a federal judge struck down a controversial plan supported by the state's wildlife agency, the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Department, to "study" whether killing black bears — and mountain lions — would benefit mule deer. Sadly, the judge's ruling denying federal funding of the bear-killing plan came too late for the dozens of Colorado bears that were killed in the study, one the agency's scientists had to know was laden with anti-carnivore bias.

Though Colorado and Montana are worlds apart on the political spectrum, the hostility towards bears and other carnivores is a tie that binds, whether it originates in a state legislature or in the state agency charged with managing wildlife.

At a time when the attitudes of most Montanans, Coloradans and Americans at large are shifting dramatically to favor greater coexistence with fanged creatures, those in power over the lives of wild animals are digging in their heels. Instead of figuring out how to live with them, Montana and Colorado are making it easier to kill bears.

The word poetry comes from the Greek *poetes*, meaning "to create." Whenever possible, I believe we should attempt to create opportunities for all life to thrive. It pains me that often those at the state level responsible for overseeing the management of wildlife seem to take more pleasure in the destruction of bears than in figuring out better ways for humans to coexist with them.

Wildlife management needs a new reason to exist, one that isn't based on killing. Its mission might read like this: We aim to protect wildlife, making no distinction between predator and prey. We aim to enhance that sense of wonder most of us experience when we see animals in the wild.

And instead of taking more courses in traditional wildlife management, the profession might consider including reading some of the best American poetry inspired by nature and the creatures that depend on still-

wild places.

They could start with Mary Oliver's *Spring*.

John Horning is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is the executive director of WildEarth Guardians.