

**Can't Chew the Leather Anymore: musings on Wildlife Conservation in Yellowstone from a
Broken-down Biologist**

Written by P.J. White

Edited by Robert A. Garrott

United States: The Yellowstone Association, 2016, ISBN 978-0-934948-39-5

Reviewed by Tyler Brasington

[The greatest value of Yellowstone may be the] "authenticity of its wildness - the opportunity for us to be awed and learn from nature making its own decisions."

-Paul Schullery

P.J. White is the Branch Chief of Wildlife and Aquatic Resources at Yellowstone National Park. In his book "Can't Chew the Leather Anymore," White attempts to advance wildlife conservation in the Yellowstone area by providing the reader most recent and up-to-date scientific, social, and political issues both surrounding and influencing current park management. Additionally, White targets newer professionals and students of wildlife conservation by providing advice, lessons, and tribulations to avoid at least some of the pitfalls he encountered. By acknowledging his shortcomings and biases, White provides an objective overview of the complex and controversial issues relevant to philosophy, management, and leadership involving wildlife conservation at America's first national park.

"Can't Chew the Leather Anymore" attempts to define what we are trying to preserve in Yellowstone concerning wildlife. The book includes three sections: Section I (philosophy), Section II (management), and Section III (leadership). In the opening essay, a plethora of contentious issues are covered, ranging from the anthropomorphism of wildlife, the habituation factor, climate change, and direct human intervention in managing wildlife. The opening essays of the book set the stage and philosophical foundation for the continued discussion of these controversial and sometimes emotionally charged subjects later in the book. White covers issues ranging from grizzly bear recovery and future management, free-ranging bison on federal and state lands, and the issues surrounding fisheries, lake trout, and invasive species.

This book documents the success of gathering ecological insights from rigorously planned and executed field studies, which directly contribute to the development of effective policy for conservation and management of wildlife in Yellowstone. Contrary to belief, the book also outlines the opposition; some believe that research and studies should be absent in parks because of their invasive methods, and if there is unnecessary risk or chance of death to the wildlife involved. "Some animals are inadvertently killed during captures for research activities, such as to fit radio collars and assess body condition and reproductive status"

(White, 2016, p. 55). Moreover, White explores the emotionally charged issue of removing wildlife involved in conflicts (property, humans)

The intricate philosophy and strategy surrounding the management and research of both grizzly and black bears still prove too contentious between the park and the outside community. One significant realization that White uncovers is that if bears go without being managed, the support and protection of their habitats may wane if they continually find themselves in trouble, conflict, or are involved in injury or fatalities of humans. Should management fade, White suggests that there would be more intrusive management and even less tolerance for grizzly bears locally and regionally.

The reader is not only exposed to the complexities involving the philosophy of wildlife conservation and management but the complexities of 'players, 'parties, and stakeholders involved. Most of the general public is unfamiliar with the park's mission. The creation of Yellowstone National Park's was to "provide against the wanton destruction of the fish and game found within" for their "preservation in their natural condition ... for the benefit and enjoyment of people" (Park Protective Act of 1894, p.17) and "...the wildlife therein ... by such means, as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" (Organic Act of 1916, p.17). White and others suggest that there needs to be more recognition by stakeholders of the park's mission. Others include but are not limited to anglers (fly fishermen) and outdoor guides, and general park visitors.

White dives into great detail, focusing on important contentious and controversial issues surrounding wildlife in Yellowstone. He tackles grizzly bear delisting and the future of potential trophy hunts while supplying important, relevant information that otherwise goes overlooked. Park managers request and push for a focus on the majority of future bear harvests away from park boundaries, such as in areas where human-bear conflicts are prevalent. Unfortunately, White fails to address the ethics of the current bear management strategy of 'habituated tolerance' and what that could mean for hunting grizzly bears on or near the park boundary. Additionally, White provides persuasive examples for successful leadership and negotiation for young professionals in "Essay Ten: Tea with the Mad Hatter: negotiating the Impossible with the Irrational," however, provides feeble solutions to many of the complex issues discussed, like those in "Essay One: Wildlife in Yellowstone: What are we trying to preserve?" citing self-preservation. One of the more challenging questions in this book for preserving and managing wildlife: when should nature make its own decisions, and how do we draw the line for when human intervention is necessary?

After providing context to issues faced by wildlife managers in Yellowstone, White provides persuasive examples and outlines essential and critical lessons that build successful leaders and assist in developing early career professionals. He attributes two things which are equally important (1) accomplishing your goal and mission, and (2) taking care of your people. By fulfilling these two areas, this will earn the trust and respect of your co-workers regardless of position. White places an emphasis is placed on the importance of accountability, integrity, and honor, doing what is right, even when nobody is watching, and doing the right thing even when it is hard. White (2016, p.108) states, "the rarest commodity

in wildlife biology is an original idea." I would have to agree. Wildlife management is often about creating and implementing new, unique solutions to often complex problems that require a dynamic and adaptive approach. White reiterates, in his final chapters, being curious and thoughtful about the world around, is critical in developing original ideas. While original ideas may be necessary, White also addressed that if you cannot define clear objectives and a means to attain them, you will fail to reach your desired outcome; wildlife conservation and management is a process.

Being equipped with soft and modest negotiation skills are essential for young professionals, especially those students in wildlife, to develop. While not always easy, White describes that effective wildlife management is about innovation, practical solutions, developing connections and coalitions, and working collaboratively to solve both simple and complex issues. I agree with the approach to learn from your experiences and openly share and discuss lessons with your colleagues. Listening to concerns and ideas from various parties and stakeholder groups help build cohesion and trust while establishing progress toward your desired goal(s).

In recent years, many place heavy criticism on the up and coming generation of wildlife professionals. White (2016, p.124) counters this criticism, stating: "*I often hear grumblings from my veteran and wildlife biologist buddies about how young folks today just don't measure up to those of yore. Don't listen to these biased recollections that are probably just a manifestation of mad cow disease anyways. Having grown up in yore, I can assure you that today's biologists are smarter, better educated and trained, work just as hard and, when you hide their cell phones, focus just as well.*"

"Can't Chew the Leather Anymore" is a must-read for all aspiring wildlife professionals. It documents and outlines some of the most contentious and controversial issues of wildlife management today, while comparing and contrasting managerial views to stakeholders involved, providing advice, lessons, and tribulations to help guide and equip a new generation of natural resource and wildlife personnel.