

Interview with Seth Wilson, Executive Director of the Blackfoot Challenge

# FROM “ME” TO “WE”: LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER

Interviewer: Robin Rigg

<https://blackfootchallenge.org/wildlife/>

## *Where do you work?*

The Blackfoot River watershed in western Montana, USA. It's a relatively undeveloped rural landscape south of a huge complex of wild lands with core populations of large carnivores.

## *In relation to cattle, which is the most problematic predator in the area?*

Grizzly bears during the calving season and also wolves, to a lesser extent mountain lions.

## *When did issues with carnivores first arise?*

The first conflicts involving grizzly bears began in the late 1990s. We had some calves killed and we were seeing some beehive-related conflicts. Then on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2001 an elk hunter was fatally mauled. He was going back to get an elk he'd killed and a female grizzly with cubs had taken over the carcass. It was one of those defensive encounter situations and he died from his injuries.

## *How did you get involved?*

I was just finishing my PhD on human-bear conflicts in a different part of Montana and I saw something in the press about conflicts in the Blackfoot, which is fairly close to where I live in Missoula. It piqued my interest that bears were coming into this area with ranches and lots of private land. After the fatality, the Blackfoot Challenge hosted a meeting

and we talked about the issues and how to address the problem. I offered to do some GIS mapping to help prioritise where to focus. Over the next year, I sat down with livestock producers and let them show me where their calving areas and bone yards were and where they were seeing bears, a sort of bottom-up approach to research.

During that first year, the Blackfoot Challenge helped bring people together and asked me to coordinate a new wildlife committee that we set up. There was no money, we had nothing, we were just eager and passionate about wanting to try to solve a problem that the community wanted us to address. But we had a lot of the right people in the room. The committee brought key stakeholders together: state



Reinforced sliding bear door at a Montana ranch.

(Photo: Blackfoot Challenge staff)

Electric fence installation with Challenge Wildlife Program  
Coordinator Eric Graham.

*(Rebecca Reeves, US Fish and Wildlife Service)*





Range Rider checking game camera.

(Photo: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media)

and federal wildlife managers, livestock producers and NGOs. I wrote some grants that helped get us started, then I had to raise money to keep our work going for the next 12 years.

### ***What is the Blackfoot Challenge?***

The Blackfoot Challenge is a non-government organisation (NGO) formed by landowners and ranchers in 1993, but its origins go back to the 1970s. In the face of growing threats to natural resources and their rural way of life, people realised that they could accomplish much more by working together and building partnerships with public agencies.

It really helped us to have that ready-made platform. It's a theme I see all over the world: the need for a trusted entity, an umbrella organisation, with the capacity to bring people together, to bring a framework to the discussions. It can be a state organisation or NGO, a researcher, a university, a local hunting club or a mayor. One of the lessons learned is to ask yourself the question, is there existing capacity that could help address the issue of reducing conflict? I think that's essential and one of the reasons we've had success over the years.

### ***It might surprise our readers that an environmental NGO was started by cattle ranchers!***

There's a long tradition of stewardship among livestock producers in places like Montana. They depend on clean water and sustainable uses of soil so grass productivity can feed their cattle. The tagline on our logo is "*Better rural communities through collaborative conservation*". Our chairman likes to say it's a people project and that conservation starts with conversations that lead to building trust. What's happened

over decades of work is that bringing people together allows us to do conservation work and tackle other issues across the watershed, from grizzly bears to forestry to rivers and fish. It's enabled us to address multiple conservation issues in a holistic manner. Not every rancher likes bears but they know that there are people willing to help maintain their productivity and profitability. Sometimes the conservation community gets too narrowly focused on carnivores when they are just one of the issues people are dealing with. The fact that we can address other needs, too, makes it easier for ranchers to participate in our carnivore programmes. The ranchers always remind me that it's not just about bears and wolves!

### ***Solving conflicts is not just about deploying fences and guard dogs?***

It's beyond technical things. There's also empathy, value sharing. All my staff care about the individual producers we work with. Some are easier to work with than others, that's reality. I think that the producers, the landowners, really value knowing that we are there and although as trained conservation biologists we sometimes have different values we also respect and share some of the same values. David Mannix, one of the great ranchers in our project, said to me one day, "If the customers who support my ranch and want to buy my beef care about wolves and bears, I need to pay attention to that!". So, it's about evolving values over time. When you have conservation biologists and an environmental community that care about the sustainability of the ranchers and the land, those ranchers feel like they're in this with us together and that's powerful. It's not a fight – it's "we", it's "how can we all be better"?

We've got so many tools out there, it's really about bringing people together and building the goodwill to try to use them. If you focus on the people part and fostering good relations, the tools are more easily adopted. It's sort of like a pyramid. You build a foundation of trust and then they're like, "Oh, that's reasonable, we can try an electric fence, we can try range riders." The tools are really just the tip of the pyramid.

### ***That's very different from the approach of many activists and advocates.***

David talks about the "80/20 Rule". He says if we focus on the 80% of where we can find commonality we can get early successes which then allow us to



Electric mat group demonstration.

(Photo: Blackfoot Challenge staff)

address the harder 20%. That's a good rule of thumb: start with the easier stuff, the "low-hanging fruit". Where are the common interests? Twenty years ago, there was a lot of concern about invasive weeds, so the Blackfoot Challenge focused on helping to deal with weeds, the War on Weeds in the West! [laughs] Everyone felt great about that, we were all dealing with weeds together. Over the years you build that trust and credibility through partnerships and then you start dealing with more complex and challenging issues that can be more polarising, like wolves and bears. By initially focusing on that 80% of commonality it allows you to discuss the harder issues in a civil way. If you're always fighting, you're never going to get it done.

***Going back to bears, what specific measures were taken and did they work?***

Electric fences, livestock carcass pick-up and composting, range riders and – in the case of wolves – fladry. They've all been really good tools. All the range riders are local residents so we're creating jobs which

is always helpful. There's also management of garbage and other attractants. We're providing ranchers with shipping containers to protect their livestock feed. We've used a lot of electric fencing and we're developing drive-over electric mats<sup>1</sup> to be used in high-use areas like an entrance to a ranch so that you don't have to open and close gates. This makes it easier for someone to put a perimeter fence around their whole property, the residence and the calving area, to make it secure from predators but practical to work in. We use a lot of trail cameras to study wolf movements to understand where their denning and rendez-vous sites are so we don't bring cattle right in on top of wolves and we can think about where we might want to delay pasture use.

The one tool I wish we had more experience with and use of is livestock guarding dogs. We are mostly cattle-dominated and most folks here have not run their cattle with dogs, although there have been a few instances in Montana. Every context is different, but I've always been curious if that would be another tool for us to think about.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blackfootchallenge.org/electric-fence/>



Rancher Jack Rich with refuse containers secured from bears.

(Photo: Blackfoot Challenge staff)

### ***Who pays for the range riders?***

We do – the Blackfoot Challenge. We hire all the local riders. We depend on public and private sources of finance. One of the largest chunks of my job as Director is fundraising.

### ***People are clearly a big part of your work.***

Yes, it's like what academics call social capital: relationships that have been fostered and strengthened over time so you have a collective reservoir of trust. That allows you to experiment and try new things with an understanding that, if it fails, we can try something different but it doesn't mean that preventive measures are a failure or conservationists are silly for proposing them. It's a safer environment for trying riskier ideas because people trust each other and they are not just going to discount it out of hand or allow rumours to develop that none of this stuff works. Rumours like that can really set you back.

### ***It seems that you're achieving a lot of success.***

During the last 20 years we've got almost all the beehives protected with electric fences so we have very few if any beehive-related conflicts now. There's an occasional loss when there is a malfunction in a fence, for example, but in general beehive conflicts have been taken care of. We have higher rates of garbage-related conflicts than livestock losses, so we still have plenty of work to do in residential areas and campgrounds. We're working with our communities and public agency partners on bear-resistant dumpsters and managing attractants. We've got dozens of bear-resistant dumpsters, cans and rubbish containers but when they get old you have to replace them so it's a long-term, constant effort that's expensive and, as bears spread into new areas, we need to address attractants there, too.

The bear population has expanded, we had another human fatality in the summer of 2021, and people are asking some tough questions – How much is enough? How many bears do we need to live with? What do you do if a bear develops learned behaviour that's dangerous to people? Do we need to have swifter management responses? That kind of questioning is part of our process, where we can bring people together and have the science and management framework so that we can continue to be problem-focused and use the tools that reduce conflicts and help keep people safe and keep a viable population of bears. I have trust in our process and that we can make thoughtful and reasoned decisions about how to live alongside bears.

### ***How do you establish and maintain that process?***

If I showed you a map of our area, there is a patchwork of ownership and management jurisdictions from private lands to parcels in public ownership that are managed by both state and federal agencies like the US Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management. What makes us different from many other NGOs is that our board of directors is made up of the key decision-makers who own or manage the private and public lands in our area. In a sense, we've created a forum for conservation governance – and this takes a lot of meeting and discussions. We have monthly board meetings and our workgroups and committees meet regularly throughout the year. All told, this creates a continuous roundtable for information flow across all the relevant stakeholders.

Being community based, we listen to what's important to the local community and try to respond. We use science, we are informed by science, but our work is not driven by science – we avoid that hard-headed, “we know best” attitude. If you create a discussion space, you can have your science or your management information at the table to inform decision-making.

***What happens if someone comes along who thinks they can solve a long-term problem by fighting hard for what they want and not compromising?***

The Blackfoot Challenge really acts as a leveller. It helps to guard against that sort of Lone Ranger effect: “I’m gonna come in and I’m gonna do it!” and it’s like “Wait, you may have some great ideas, and we can do it together.” In some ways it’s not worrying about who gets the credit. I think of this as intellectual divestment. If you bring a good idea into the discussion space and people think about it for a while and take it on, you shouldn’t worry about whose idea it was. It becomes everybody’s. As scientists and environmentalists we’re not trained for that, right? We’re trained to think it’s our idea and we want recognition. That was one of the early lessons I learned: the sooner you can figure that out and stop worrying about getting credit, it’s really important in this work – to move from “I” to “we”.

A well-meaning environmentalist might come in with all the tools in their backpack, with the techno fix, and says, “This is how we’re going to solve it!” but no one wants to do it. Why? Because they haven’t felt like they’re part of the process, they haven’t felt invested in it, and they likely have many other issues they’re dealing with. What we want is people to be

able to live safely with bears, but you don’t necessarily lead your conversations with the bears. You start with the people who are living with bears, whose livestock matter to them. You “meet people where they are” and go from there.

At the end of the day, the landowners who live here, work here, whose kids they’d like to see here, and depend on this place for their long-term livelihood, they’re the glue that keeps all of us together. They are really invested in trying to do the right thing. You need some of that leadership literally from the ground up. If you have the landowners willing to work with all the different experts and bring those skills and resources, then you get something done.



Seth Wilson is an applied conservation biologist who has worked on resolving issues between people and wildlife in N. America and Europe for more than 20 years. He was born in New York and raised in Connecticut but from 1993 made his home in Montana where he earned his PhD. Seth began working for the Blackfoot Challenge in 2001 as the organization’s first Wildlife Coordinator, helping to gather baseline data and develop strategies to reduce conflicts. He then spent three years in Slovenia as an advisor to the Slovenian Forest Service and partners from Austria, Croatia, Italy, Romania and Slovakia to support bear and lynx conservation and management. Returning to the Blackfoot Challenge, Seth became its Executive Director in 2019.

## Select publications:

- Wilson SM et al. (2005) Natural landscape features, human-related attractants, and conflict hotspots: a spatial analysis of human-grizzly bear conflicts. *Ursus* 16(1): 117–129. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3873065>.
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- Wilson SM (2016) *A guidebook to human-carnivore conflict: strategies and tips for effective communication and collaboration with communities*. Slovenia Forest Service – LIFE DINALP BEAR project, Ljubljana, Slovenia. 60 pp. [https://dinalpbear.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENGLISH\\_Guidebook\\_Seth\\_Wilson\\_WEB2.pdf](https://dinalpbear.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENGLISH_Guidebook_Seth_Wilson_WEB2.pdf).
- Wilson SM et al. (2017) Learning to live with wolves: community-based conservation in the Blackfoot Valley of Montana. *Human-Wildlife Interactions* 11(3): 245–257. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/bf8e-6f56>.