

Parks urge caution as bears come out of hibernation

By Chuck Raasch, USA Today

Yellowstone National Park rangers are preparing for the upcoming tourist season by updating bear-warning signs and stepping up grizzly-awareness education after two hikers died in separate grizzly attacks in the park last summer.

The deaths of men from Michigan and California, the first in 25 years, reflect a rising trend of human-bear encounters in North America, as the populations of grizzlies and black bears have increased and as humans have encroached on their habitat.

Yellowstone officials had contemplated making it mandatory that hikers travel in groups and carry bear-repellant pepper spray, park spokesman Dan Hottle says, but enforcement would have been difficult, so Yellowstone officials are updating bear-warning signs, and park publications feature ways to avoid confrontations. Rangers will conduct bear-spray demonstrations.

“Encounters are most definitely a fact of life” as the grizzly population grows, Hottle says.

These encounters are not just in wild places anymore. Wildlife officials from New Jersey to California will meet Monday in Missoula, Mont., to discuss how cities, states and parks can deal with growing bear populations.

“What we can do as managers to minimize those conflicts is to educate people how to live with bears,” says organizer Chris Servheen, grizzly bear recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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