

Grizzly Man (2005)

Directed by Werner Herzog



Grizzly Man is a documentary, directed by the world-renowned German filmmaker Werner Herzog, about an American called Timothy Treadwell, who would camp out every summer in the Alaskan wilderness and film the grizzly bears. After ten summers spent in bear country, Treadwell was eventually killed and eaten (along with his girlfriend) by the bears that he loved. The documentary was made by piecing together the thousand hours of footage that Treadwell captured with his digital camera while on his expeditions. Throughout the documentary, Werner provides a stoic narration, often giving contrasting views to Treadwell's romanticized ideas of nature.

In the closing moments of *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog considers some of the last footage shot by Timothy Treadwell before a hungry bear mauled Treadwell and his girlfriend to death in Alaska's Katmai National Park on October 5, 2003. The bear in the footage, Herzog observes, could very well be Treadwell's killer: It's an old, desperate creature looking for food after the last of the summer salmon runs have dried up. Treadwell stuck around too long after his 13th summer living among the bears, and the extreme danger of camping in the "grizzly maze," a dense forest where he and the animals couldn't spot one another from a distance, was even more heightened. What

happened wasn't a surprise to anyone, least of all Treadwell himself: He told a friend every year, "If I don't come back, it's what I want. This is the way I want to go." And it confirms Herzog's long-held beliefs about nature.

It could be argued that this is the moment when Herzog finally tips his hand over Treadwell, a controversial figure who believed himself to be "a kind warrior," protecting these bears from poachers and other, more vaguely defined threats to their existence. And there's plenty of evidence, like the quote above, that makes it clear how far Herzog's view of nature deviates from the anthropomorphized fantasy Treadwell lived out every year. One of the elements that makes *Grizzly Man* such a fascinating documentary is the contentious dialogue between Herzog's narration and Treadwell's running commentary, but it isn't the film's purpose to settle the debate over the correct perspective on nature. That was resolved by the bear. Herzog's true interest is the more mysterious realm of *human* nature, and with Treadwell, he adds to a career-long obsession with visionaries undone by hubris and madness.

In one scene, Treadwell credits his summers among the bears for rescuing him from alcoholism, brought out by a lifetime of disappointments that the film evokes as much as it can. The outtakes, as well as interviews with the people who really knew him, don't quite fit the tidy profile of the dumb environmentalist who, in the harsh words of a local helicopter pilot, "was acting like he was working with people wearing bear costumes out there, instead of wild animals." According to the pilot, "he got what he was asking for, he got what he deserved." But Treadwell's behavior was part of an aspirational goal to cast off the shackles of civilization and live as simply and freely as the animals.

Student's activity:

- Define the underlined words and phrases from the article
- Watch the video and answer the following questions:

1. Why do male bears sometimes kill bear cubs?

2. How do the filmmaker's opinions about nature differ from Timothy's?

3. Why do they suspect the bear of being Timothy's killer? How was it identified?

4. What does Werner suggest about Timothy's last moments on camera?

Discussion -

1. Timothy had a mission to raise awareness and protection for bears, do you think he was successful?
2. Was he delusional or just extremely passionate?
3. Is it a good ideal for humans to enter an animal's natural habitat? What are the consequences for us and for them?
4. Do you think the bears loved Timothy like he loved them, or did they only see him as food?
5. Whose opinion of nature do you most agree with, Timothy's or Werner's?