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## Grizzly Bear Recovery In Alberta

By Peter Zimmerman

In the fall of 2002 the provincial Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, Mike Cardinal, established a Grizzly Bear Recovery Team in response to the recommendation by the Endangered Species Subcommittee (ESSC) that the grizzly bear be reclassified as a “threatened” species in this province. Under provisions of the Wildlife Act, such a reclassification would have automatically meant that a Grizzly Bear Recovery Team be put in place and that a moratorium on hunting occur.

The minister chose to defer his decision on classification but did put a recovery team together whose mandate is to create a recovery plan for grizzlies in Alberta within a one-year timeframe. He has also allowed the limited entry hunt to continue in 2003, although with a reduced allowable take. Out of the 26 grizzly mortalities so far this year, 18 have been legal hunting kills.

A generous perspective might say creating a recovery team while his decision on reclassification is pending is being responsible and proactive. A more cynical, or perhaps realistic view, would be that he may simply be trying to keep the Feds from intervening with the new Species at Risk Act (SARA) by going through some motions but without making any substantive changes to the status quo. Without the authority of the reclassification under the Wildlife Act, any recovery plan developed will be a recommendation only, leaving the minister to act, or not, at his discretion. It also lets him continue to allow an annual hunt.

Whatever his motives, the recovery team, consisting of representatives from industry, ranching, several ENGOs (including AWA), government and the university research community has now been working for almost 10 months to build a plan to recover grizzly bear numbers in this province.

Progress has been slow to date, in part because the minister has not released a critical document the team requires. This is a technical report prepared by several researchers that, among other things, critically examines the current method of calculating the grizzly bear population in Alberta. For some time the accepted number has been somewhere around 850 for the entire province, with the trend showing an increase in numbers. Rumour has it that this report will demonstrate that the number is really much lower and the trend much flatter. Based on this new population number, the rate of total human cause (THC) mortalities will probably exceed the four per cent THC mortality cap that the team has agreed needs to be in place as one objective of the recovery plan.

Why the minister would withhold this important document for so long – it was sent to him in January of this year – from the very team he mandated to create a recovery plan is difficult to understand, unless of course you subscribe to the more cynical point of view. At the time of this writing, the document has gone all the way up to the cabinet level and is to be released “any time,” so we are told.

Even with this document available, moving forward to build a meaningful recovery plan for a species such as the grizzly, which ranges over a very large portion of the province where there is a great deal of industrial and recreational activity, will be a very tricky bit of business to accomplish in one year. The Yellowstone Park Grizzly Bear Recovery plan, which is the only successful plan in North America to date, took nine years to build and implement.

So far the recovery team has agreed on seven broad objectives:

- Limit the rate of human-caused mortality
- Manage reproductive parameters to achieve desired population goals





- Maintain current bear range and expand where possible and/or desirable
- Conserve and improve habitat suitability and effectiveness
- Enhance connectivity of habitat and re-establish where fracturing is evident
- Reduce human-bear conflicts
- Obtain and improve grizzly bear population data on an ongoing basis.

There are seven corresponding strategies for each objective. These strategic areas include Education, Policy and Legislation, Population Monitoring, Research, Management Activities, Access Management, and Interjurisdiction Cooperation. The team is now working to fill in the specific actions for each strategy and objective.

Regardless of what the final recovery plan looks like, the Achilles heel of this process is that the grizzly is still not reclassified as “threatened” and until that occurs, there is little to compel the minister to act. It also somewhat hamstrings the recovery team in that we have to deal with some thorny issues – such as hunting – that would be automatic if the threatened status was in place.

Only time will tell how effective the final plan will be in recovering grizzly bear numbers in this province. Anything AWA members can do – such as writing the minister or your MLA – to encourage the minister to proceed with the reclassification, would help move this ahead.

*(Peter Zimmerman represents AWA, CPAWS, Y2Y and GBA (Grizzly Bear Alliance) on the Grizzly Bear Recovery Team. Note: The Grizzly Bear Alliance (GBA) has initiated a FOIPP action to obtain the “Technical Report” mentioned in the last Grizzly Bear Recovery Team update. Gord Stenhouse, the Recovery Team Chair, has informed the Director of Wildlife that the team will not meet again until the report is in our hands.)*

### **Grizzly Facts and Figures**

- Estimated population in Alberta: 500 – 1,000 individuals (population estimates vary considerably).
- Estimated population in Alberta in the 1800s: 6,000 individuals.
- There are an estimated 300-690 “mature breeding individuals.” This compares with a recommended minimum of 1,000 to maintain a stable, healthy population (IUCN).
- Between 1972-96, there were 838 recorded human-caused grizzly bear deaths.
- Twenty-six recorded grizzly deaths in Alberta in the first half of 2003 (2.5 – 3 per cent of the population). Grizzly mortality is usually highest in September, October and November.
- A hundred and one grizzly hunting licences issued in 2003.
- Eighteen legal hunting kills in the first half of 2003.
- Fall 2002 – the Alberta government’s Endangered Species Subcommittee recommends the grizzly should be designated a “threatened species.” For the first time, the government has refused to act upon this recommendation.
- Fall 2002 – Grizzly Bear Recovery Team (GBRT) established. For “threatened” species, recovery teams usually have two years to draw up a recovery plan. GBRT is given one year.
- In a recent poll of visitors to Banff National Park, 75 per cent of respondents said it was “morally wrong” to kill grizzly bears “in most circumstances,” and 61 per cent believe grizzly bear hunting should be stopped. Only 15 per cent would visit a park without grizzlies.
- A recent report by the Raincoast Conservation Society and the Centre for Integral Economics examining both the ecotourism and hunting industries concludes that bears in British Columbia are worth almost twice as much alive – \$6.1 million annually – as dead.

