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How Much Politicking Went Into Grizzly Hunt Decision?

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

The grizzly bear hunt has certainly roused the passions of people both for and against it. While the Alberta Fish and Game Association are for the hunt, claiming science is on their side, an authoritative group of scientists wants it stopped. But the hunt is going ahead as planned. No surprise, then, that Ron Millson, Head of Wildlife Allocation and Use at Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) and one of the senior staff who advised going ahead with the hunt, admitted that no decision is made without politics.

April 1 (appropriately enough) marks the beginning of the 2005 spring grizzly bear hunt. Licences will be issued to allow 73 hunters the opportunity to hunt grizzlies between April 1 and May 31. Meanwhile, the evidence mounts that Alberta's grizzly bear population continues to struggle.

"Most knowledgeable scientists will agree that the grizzly bear in Alberta is on a slow slide to extinction," says Dr. Paul Paquet, director of the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project. Dr. Paquet is one of a group of scientists, including Dr. Stephen Herrero, Dr. David Suzuki, and Killam Award-winner Dr. David Schindler, who released a letter in March 2005 urging the Alberta government to list the grizzly bear as a "threatened" species under the province's Wildlife Act.

"If the government wants to reverse this trend, they need to sincerely and effectively control human activity that threatens bears, protect grizzly bear habitat vital to the species survival, and stop the hunt," says the letter. The scientists' voice is added to that of the provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Team and the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee, which have both recommended an immediate suspension of the hunt.

In February 2005, the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project issued a report summarizing its nine-year study into grizzly bears in the Banff National Park/Kananaskis Country area. One important aspect of grizzly bear biology highlighted in this report is the surprisingly low productivity of bears in the region. Females produced their first surviving litter at an average 8.4 years. Litters averaged 1.84 cubs, with an interval of 4.4 years between litters. This is a low rate of productivity by any standard, reinforcing the importance of keeping mortality of bears, particularly females, as low as possible.

But the report also found that 75 per cent of female deaths and 86 per cent of male deaths were human-caused. Of the 18 grizzly bears that were removed from the population during the study, only three died of natural causes. Four were legally killed, two were illegally killed, two were shot in self defence, two died in transportation-related accidents, and three were killed as "nuisance" bears. Two other "nuisance" bears were captured and removed from the population.

While the science continues to point to a struggling grizzly population in Alberta, the justification for the grizzly hunt becomes more and more peculiar. The Web site for Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) lists a number of reasons for continuing with the grizzly hunt. These range from the supportable ("There is a long-standing hunting tradition and a high demand"); to the scientifically insupportable ("The population growth rate is potentially increased by harvest of adult males that kill and eat young grizzlies"); to the faintly ridiculous ("Hunting harvest provides information about bears" and "Hunting maintains a knowledgeable group of people who are strong advocates for Alberta's grizzly population").





"Bear hunters want direct experience of nature because they see life as an adventure," writes Barry Cooper of the Fraser Institute in the *Calgary Herald* (March 16, 2005). "This is why the spring grizzly hunt in Alberta expresses a hardiness – yea, a manliness – that can yet be celebrated." Is this all it comes down to: testosterone?

SRD managers continually refer to the "conservative" management of grizzly bears in Alberta. Ron Millson told a concerned citizen in a recent telephone conversation that SRD Minister David Coultts's decision was based on "staff recommendations" and that he (Millson) "won't make any decision that will harm bear populations." He admits that SRD does not have really good population data but thinks they get a good idea of the grizzly bear population from the complaints they receive, especially from farmers.

Millson doesn't think hunting harms grizzly populations and blames their decline on habitat loss. And if grizzlies disappear from Alberta, well, there are thousands more in B.C. and the Territories. He stated that most jurisdictions use a 5 to 6 per cent annual hunting rate as standard, adding that even a population of only 250 bears can withstand a hunting harvest of 10 bears per year indefinitely.

As justification, he cited a 1993 report by P. D. McLoughlin, *Managing risk of decline for hunted populations of grizzly bears given uncertainty in population parameters*. According to McLoughlin 4.8 per cent "human-caused mortality" is acceptable, but hunting harvest is only a part of "human-caused mortality." In his view, a 5 per cent hunting harvest would be (nearly) acceptable in optimum habitat with no other sources of human mortality, which certainly isn't Alberta! The ESGBP study recorded four hunting deaths out of 18 human-caused mortalities. Alberta's Eastern Slopes do not represent "optimal" habitat; probably not even "moderate" habitat. Human-caused mortality includes many factors besides the hunt, including road deaths, poaching, and "nuisance" bears.

While following the trouble of Alberta's grizzly bears over the years has been an extremely frustrating experience, the one major note of optimism is that we know exactly why Alberta's grizzly bears are in trouble, and we know exactly what we need to do to recover them. Yet the grizzly remains in trouble.

"It's all about values," says writer Jeff Gailus. "Albertans, and Canadians, must decide whether they want to allow men to 'express their manliness' by killing bears, and continue to develop grizzly bear habitat to the point of pushing them further north and west and, eventually, out of the province altogether. Or do they want to live in a province of citizens that have the thoughtfulness and wisdom to restrain their egos and appetites to allow grizzly bears, and the clean water and other species that accompany them, to remain part of our heritage?"

Let the government know your concerns about our grizzly bears.

The scientists' letter and news release can be found on our website. Jeff Gailus's blog can be found at www.actionworks.ca/albertagrizzlies/blog.html.

