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Government Shooting Itself over Grizzly Hunt

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

Recent incidents surrounding the withholding of critical grizzly information and the removal of Alberta's grizzly bear specialist have raised serious questions about the government's ability to manage Alberta's grizzly bear population. A considerable amount of information, including revealing population studies, 2005 mortality figures, and the 2004 draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, have been withheld from the public.

The information was also withheld from David Coutts, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), which is charged with managing Alberta's fish and wildlife, until the end of January when the grizzly hunt decision was supposed to have been made. Then suddenly government biologist Gord Stenhouse was removed as Provincial Grizzly Bear Specialist at the end of January, even though he remains chair of the provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Team.

What's the Big Secret?

Conservation groups are concerned that the government will allow the hunt to proceed again this year, despite having ample information on grizzly population numbers that suggest the hunt is not sustainable. An SRD spokesman recently told CTV reporter David Gray that the government won't release the information because most Albertans simply "won't understand them" until they are put into context. SRD's communication department has also been known to consider itself a peer review committee for what they consider sensitive studies.

The most important study that is not being released is the DNA-based grizzly bear population estimates for parts of northern Alberta, which have been developed by government grizzly scientists over the past two years. DNA-based population studies are currently the most scientifically accurate method for estimating population size for bears distributed over large areas. Two years' worth of publicly funded genetic studies of grizzly populations between Highways 1 and 16 carried a provincial tax-dollar price tag of \$750,000.

Uncertainty over Alberta's grizzly population has been cited as a justification for continuing the hunt and not listing the grizzly as "threatened." Yet these studies promise to tell us more about the status of Alberta's grizzlies than ever before. Dr. Tracey Henderson of the Grizzly Bear Alliance and the Jasper Environmental Association tried unsuccessfully, via the provincial Freedom of Information Act, to access these data, as well as the total grizzly bear mortality numbers for the past year, which have always been readily accessible in the past.

"There's no doubt that if this had shown more bears than previously thought, the government would have had that out in the public eye immediately," says Henderson.

The government said it would release the 2005 mortality data at the end of January 2006. It is strongly suspected that more than 40 grizzly bears were killed by humans in 2005 (including 10 killed in the spring hunt). If this is true, it would be the highest number of grizzlies killed in a single year in the last 10 years.

Recovering the Grizzly Recovery Plan

The government also refuses to release the draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. The government established the multi-stakeholder Grizzly Bear Recovery Team following a 2002 recommendation by the Alberta Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) to list the grizzly as a "threatened" species (when the provincial population was believed to be around 1,000 bears). The team quickly assessed





exactly what was known about Alberta's grizzlies, and their best estimate of the population was "less than 700 individuals." They also made recommendations for recovering the grizzly bear, including better managing human access to grizzly habitat, protecting key areas for grizzly bears from excessive industrial development, and suspending the hunt.

The terms of reference for the recovery team stated that the recovery plan "will be provided to the Minister three months prior to release for public review." Thirteen months later, the plan has still not been released, and the "public review" has apparently been interpreted to mean an internal review by SRD staff and referral back to the Endangered Species Conservation Committee for review (minus up-to-date population information).

"We worked very long and hard to come up with recommendations for the province," says Mark Boyce, a University of Alberta biologist and member of the Recovery Team. "So we are certainly frustrated that that hasn't moved forward."

The Recovery Team itself has not even been provided with the recent population or mortality figures. "We always anticipated we were an integral part of the information flow," said Recovery Team member and Talisman Energy biologist Rob Staniland (*Edmonton Sun*, Jan. 16/06). "I expected we'd have that information last year. We're really suspicious now."

The removal of Stenhouse as the Provincial Grizzly Bear Biologist in January 2006 came as a surprise. As chair of the Recovery Team, Stenhouse had been under pressure from the team to find out why they had not been allowed to see population and mortality data and why nothing had been heard since the recovery plan was submitted more than a year ago.

When he expressed these concerns publicly, he was quickly informed that he was no longer Provincial Grizzly Bear Specialist. In a bizarre twist, when this news became public, an SRD spokesman initially denied that Stenhouse had been Provincial Grizzly Bear Specialist in the first place. When it was pointed out that this was how Stenhouse was listed in the government's Internet telephone directory, this denial was later retracted.

Stenhouse was clearly caught between a rock and a hard place. His comments, which initiated the entire farce, were particularly prophetic: "No matter what I do, I know I'm going to get into trouble" (*Calgary Herald*, Jan 12/06).

Who's in Charge?

Of even more concern is the question of who exactly is in charge of the decisions affecting Alberta's grizzly bears. As of February 2006, Coumts had still not seen the Recovery Plan even though it was submitted to his department in December 2004 (*Calgary Herald*, Feb. 3/06). According to his aides, he had still not been briefed on this or any of the other grizzly issues by the end of January 2006.

Yet Coumts signed off on the 2005 grizzly hunt, even though his department had in its possession the draft Recovery Plan – which recommended suspending the hunt – and the first year's genetic population studies. SRD is not doing the Minister any favours by making a circus of the grizzly issue. But more importantly, the government is doing the public a disservice by keeping information about our wildlife secret.

There still appears to be considerable opposition within government ranks to efforts to recover Alberta's grizzlies. Jim Pissot of Defenders of Wildlife Canada points to the intransigence of some wildlife managers. "Their professional reputation is predicated, in part, on having done a 'good job' conserving Alberta's grizzlies," he says. "Of course, this position has been challenged by various studies and recommendations forwarded to the Minister's office over the past four years."





To Hunt or Not to Hunt

Will having more accurate numbers influence the government to halt the spring hunt? In a recent meeting with AWA, Ray Mackowecki, then-president of the Alberta Fish and Game Association, which bills itself as the “premier conservation group in Alberta” and claims to have the ear of government, said that if the only grizzly bears left in Alberta were in the Chinchaga, it would still want to have a grizzly hunt in the Chinchaga. The government is also being fed a lot of anecdotal information from Albertans who claim they now see more grizzlies than ever before. But decisions on our wildlife need to be made with the best available science.

Argument over the hunt gets a lot of attention but can divert attention from the really pressing problem, which is the destruction of grizzly bear habitat. Jason Bender hunts grizzlies in B.C. but is still strongly opposed to the grizzly hunt in Alberta. “Hunters are taking away their ability to hunt,” says Bender. “If you’re a true hunter, you’re a conservationist first. It should be in everybody’s interest to ensure that grizzlies are still around for our kids.”

Stopping the hunt will not on its own save Alberta’s grizzlies, but it is the most effective and immediate strategy we have available to decrease the unsustainable number of bears killed every year. “What is needed now,” says a *Calgary Herald* editorial (Feb. 3/06), “is some measure of confidence that the provincial government is considering fully and objectively the information provided by its experts when determining whether to allow the grizzly hunt.” If the science does not fit in with how grizzlies are managed, maybe it is time to manipulate that management, rather than manipulating the science and the scientists.

Side box

List of documents the Alberta government has declined to release:

- DNA population studies for 2004 and 2005, partly funded by \$750,000 of taxpayer money.
- Human-caused mortality figures for grizzly bears in 2005.
- The Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, completed by the multi-stakeholder provincial Recovery Team in December 2004.
- The amended Report on Alberta Grizzly Bear Assessment of Allocation, completed in early 2005.

