



Wild Lands Advocate 14(6): 27 - 28, December 2006

Yellowstone's Grizzly Recovery a Good Lesson for Alberta

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

With the second anniversary of the submission of Alberta's draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan this December, pressure is mounting on the Alberta government to quit stalling and start introducing the real on-the-ground changes to prevent the extirpation of the province's grizzlies. Alberta would do well to learn from the Yellowstone experience. The Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan is arguably the most successful template for a species recovery program in North America. One of the key lessons from Yellowstone, the importance of habitat protection, has still not been practically addressed in Alberta.

Since the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee first recommended in 2002 that the grizzly be designated a "threatened" species, there has been some progress, including the 2006 suspension of the spring hunt and greatly improved population surveys. But hunting was never the cause of Alberta's grizzly troubles and suspending the hunt was never going to be the magic wand to solve the problem.

Learning from Yellowstone

The Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was implemented in 1982 and has been so successful that work is now underway to "de-list" the grizzly from the U.S. *Endangered Species Act*. From an estimated population of 136 individuals when the grizzly was listed in 1975, the population is now believed to be more than 600 animals (Chris Servheen, pers. comm.). The population is estimated to be increasing at a rate of 4 to 7 percent per year.

So how does Alberta's draft recovery plan bear up in comparison to the Yellowstone recovery plan? The Alberta government asked Dr. Chris Servheen, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, to provide feedback on an earlier draft of its recovery plan. At a recent Columbia Mountains Institute conference on bear conservation, he pointed to four essential elements for successful bear management:

- Biological data
- Organizational capacity to implement conservation
- Political support
- Public support

"In Alberta you have got the biological data and the organization to implement conservation," says Servheen. Then he pauses. "The weak point is the political will, and the public support is related to that."

Habitat Security is Key

Servheen stresses habitat security as the most important factor in grizzly recovery. The Yellowstone plan protected key habitats and now the U.S. Forest Service is amending its forest plans to ensure appropriate management of the bear's habitat after delisting, both measures that Alberta has not been so keen to adopt.

"Motorized access compromises habitat security," he says, "but it is also a metric that you can measure." Unrestricted access affects grizzly in two ways, he points out: displacement, where grizzlies leave areas where there is too much human activity; and direct mortality. The plan saw more than 1,000 km of roads closed and this proved to be a major element in improving habitat security.





Alberta's draft plan does address the road density issue, calling for "[o]pen route densities ... at or below 0.6 km/km² in high quality grizzly bear habitat designated as Grizzly Bear Conservation Area ... and open route densities at or below 1.2 km/km² in all remaining grizzly bear range."

Ron Millson, head of the Alberta government's Wildlife Allocation and Use, says that some measures in the plan are already being adopted, such as surveying and Bear Smart programs. But the notable exception is habitat security. On the ground nothing has changed: industrial roads continue to become public roads by default; pipelines and seismic lines are still used routinely by motorized recreationists.

Other habitat security measures in Yellowstone such as bear-resistant garbage containers in all forest campgrounds and intensive outreach to forest visitors also played their part. These measures have also been adopted successfully in Alberta.

Science is Fundamental

Servheen emphasizes that another key factor in the success of the Yellowstone recovery plan was that "science became a fundamental part of the recovery process." Science was "applied intensively." More than 150 scientific papers have been published about Yellowstone's grizzlies, but even this is not enough. "The key thing was that science was not performed in a vacuum: science and monitoring information was directly translated into management action."

In Alberta, the science behind grizzly bear conservation has been improving. Although the Alberta government has still refused to accept the recommendations of its own Endangered Species Conservation Committee to designate the grizzly as a "threatened" species, it did finally listen to its scientists and suspend the spring grizzly bear hunt. In 2004 the government also initiated a five-year program to study Alberta's grizzly population in detail. The 2004 survey of grizzlies between Highways 11 and 16 estimated a local population of 53 bears, just 36 percent of the 2003 estimate of 147.

But when it comes to translating the science into "management action," Alberta has fallen woefully short. Although Alberta's 2004 draft recovery plan stresses that "human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence," nothing has been done to address this issue.

Even in B.C., which faces the same conflicting viewpoints as Alberta, land managers largely use scientific studies to influence their decisions. Prime grizzly habitat is removed from provincial logging regimes, and the hunting numbers are based on conservative population estimates for each management area.

In Alberta, when the science does not support how the land is managed, the reaction seems to be either to ignore the science or to discredit the scientists (for example, last year's farcical saga over whether Gord Stenhouse had been sacked as provincial Grizzly Bear Specialist or had never actually had that role in the first place).

Alberta has also been extremely slow to release the scientific information that it does have. The 2003 Assessment of Allocation Report recalculated previous grizzly population figures to come up with an estimated provincial population of 700 bears. This report was updated in 2005 using more up-to-date census data but has still not been released to the Alberta public.

Cooperation is Vital

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fact sheet stresses the importance of cooperation between different interest groups. "[Recovery] could only be accomplished through close cooperation between the federal





government, state wildlife agencies, local communities, private landowners, experts from universities, and other partners.”

The recovery program was based around the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, created in 1984 with a Memorandum of Understanding signed by assistant secretaries of Agriculture and Interior and four state governors (Wyoming, Montana, Washington, and Idaho). “This agreement was crucial,” says Servheen. “It committed different agencies to common objectives and provided an accountability link.”

Alberta’s draft grizzly recovery plan was written by a multi-stakeholder team, including government and industry representatives, scientists, hunters, and environmentalists. Despite these differing backgrounds, the recovery team worked effectively and took two years to draw up its draft recovery plan. But a draft plan sitting on a dusty shelf somewhere will not recover grizzly bears.

Recovery is Possible

Servheen emphasizes the importance of political will and the need to recognize that there is a problem. He talks about the five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Charitably, he suggests that Alberta is “somewhere in the first three steps.” He believes that environmental groups have an important role to play, but not necessarily by just pointing out government deficiencies (“If the wind wants you to take your coat off, it doesn’t just blow hard”). More carrot and less stick perhaps.

Political will is tied inextricably to public attitudes. Gord Stenhouse, Provincial Grizzly Bear Biologist, summed it up at a recent conference. “Whether people can coexist with grizzly bears in Alberta over the long term will depend on society’s willingness to accommodate the grizzly bear’s need for secure habitat, while satisfying our own need for resources.”

Though some might quibble over the question of satisfying our “need” for resources versus satisfying our “desire” for resources, the message is clear. The future of Alberta’s grizzlies is our choice. It’s up to Albertans to decide whether they want to pay the price to keep them.

