



ALBERTA'S GRIZZLIES. GOING, GOING...

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

New government figures for Alberta's beleaguered grizzly bears now peg the provincial population at fewer than 500 bears, considerably lower than any previous estimates. Only five years ago, the population was believed to be around 1,000 bears, but even this was enough to warrant a recommendation by the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee to list grizzlies as a "threatened" species. The government has so far ignored that recommendation, but now even that figure of 1,000 seems to have been overly optimistic.

It remains unclear how far this decline in numbers represents an actual decrease in the number of grizzly bears, and how much it is just that we are getting better at counting them. One of the recommendations of the 2004 draft Grizzly Bear Management Plan was to improve our knowledge of grizzly bears and their habitat. To implement this recommendation, in 2004 the Foothills Model Forest was contracted by the government to initiate a program of detailed DNA census work. Three years' worth of studies have so far been completed, covering the north of Highway 3 in the Crowsnest Pass to Highway 16 west of Edmonton.

So what happens next? Imagine a young grizzly bear struggling to make its way in the unprotected Bighorn wildlands. Does it help that grizzly that a draft recovery plan has been written? No, not in itself it doesn't. Does it help that grizzly that we are better at counting grizzly bears than we used to be? No, not really. These are vital steps along the way towards the final goal of protecting grizzly bear habitat, which is the only thing that will help Alberta's grizzlies in the long run. But without this final goal, they are a waste of time and money.

Grizzlies need secure habitat. They need places where they can get

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New government figures based on three years of DNA census work indicate that less than 500 grizzlies remain in Alberta, down from the estimate of 1,000 five years ago.

away from people. The draft Recovery Plan points out that, on provincial lands in Alberta, 89 percent of human-caused mortalities were within 500 metres of a road; in the National Parks, this goes up to 100 percent within 200 metres of a road or trail. It has been proven time and time again that roads lead to dead grizzly bears. To give our grizzlies the chance to survive, Alberta must reduce the vast network of industrial roads, trails, and seismic lines that crisscross the landscape.

If there is one ray of light in the shocking mismanagement of Alberta's grizzly bears, it is the fact that we know that, with sufficient will power and resources, they can be recovered. This is one of the lessons from the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, arguably the most successful species recovery program in North America. From an estimated population of 136 individuals when the grizzly was listed as "threatened" in 1975, the population is now believed to be more than 600 animals.

Dr. Chris Servheen, US Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, stresses that habitat security is the most important factor in grizzly recovery. "Motorized access compromises habitat security," he adds, and the Yellowstone plan certainly acted to protect key grizzly habitat (the plan saw more than 1,000

km of roads closed). Unfortunately the Alberta government continues to show considerable reluctance to address this fundamental issue.

If, as he has already suggested, Premier Stelmach will not be using the brakes on Alberta's economic juggernaut any time soon, it seems that Alberta's grizzly bears will continue to be the roadkill. He's been speeding past those wildlife crossing signs, gas pedal slammed hard to the floor, and he doesn't show any signs of letting up. If he just eases back on the gas, maybe Alberta's grizzlies still have a chance. But he won't do that until Albertans insist on it.

Alberta's Disappearing Grizzlies 2002

Estimated population 1,000 bears. Alberta government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee recommends that the grizzly be designated as "threatened" under the provincial Wildlife Act.

2004

Estimated population "less than 700 bears." Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan is submitted to Alberta government.

2007

Estimated population less than 500 bears. The data from three years of genetic population studies result in revised estimates.