



ALBERTA GRIZZLY 101

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

Grizzly bear issues in Alberta easily become mired in technical terms, complicated reports, and acronyms. “The ESSC of the ESCC recommended to SRD that the grizzly should be designated as ‘threatened’ under Alberta’s WA.” So maybe it is time to take a step back and answer some of the questions that are often directed at AWA concerning Alberta’s grizzly bears.

How many grizzly bears are there in Alberta?

Nobody knows for sure, but we have a better idea than we have ever had before. In 2007, after the first three years of an in-depth five-year survey, the population is now believed to be less than 500 bears. This compares to a 2002 population estimate of 1,000 bears; by 2004, this estimate had dropped to “less than 700” (*Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan*). How much this represents an actual decline in grizzly numbers and how much it is just that we are getting better at counting them is unclear. What is clear is that these numbers are not high enough.

But some people are saying they are seeing more bears than ever.

It is important in all land management decisions that we use the best available scientific information. In the past, the water has been muddied somewhat by anecdotal reports from people who say that they are now seeing more grizzlies than ever. But since we have opened up motorized access into grizzly bear habitat at a stupendous rate over the past four decades, it is hardly surprising that people are encountering more bears. Forty years ago, to get into many areas of grizzly habitat would have required several days of hard hiking. Now you can hop on an ATV and be there within



Ironically, the grizzly, a wilderness icon, is often used to market human activities that negatively affect its habitat.

an hour. This does not mean that there are more bears: just that our likelihood of seeing them is higher.

Are grizzly bears endangered?

Alberta government scientists recommended in 2002 (when the population was believed to be 1,000 individuals) that the grizzly should be listed as a “threatened” species. Five years on, with a population of less than 500, the government has still not adopted this recommendation, even though new population estimates would warrant the grizzly being designated an “endangered” species (the next step up the ladder from “threatened”). Federally, the grizzly is listed as a species “of special concern.”

How many grizzly bears would be enough in Alberta?

It is estimated that in the 1800s there were as many as 6,000 grizzlies in Alberta. At the time they were mostly a prairie species. Clearly, it is unlikely that they will ever return to these numbers.

The World Conservation Union

(IUCN) Red List suggests that a population of 1,000 mature individuals would be listed as “vulnerable” and would therefore be “considered to be facing a high risk of extinction in the wild.” It is worth noting that 1,000 “breeding individuals” would require a total population of around 2,000 bears (including young and non-breeders).

But in the above scenario, the IUCN is talking about “populations,” and Alberta’s grizzly bears are not a “population” as such. Alberta grizzly bears can move south to the U.S., west into B.C., or north into the Northwest Territories, although this movement is thought to be limited (and likely to become more so as disturbances continue). Some people have extended this train of thought to conclude that, as there are lots of grizzlies in B.C. and in northern Canada, it doesn’t really matter if Alberta loses its grizzlies. But many Albertans would disagree!

To find a specific target for a viable grizzly bear population in Alberta, one has to go back to the 1990 *Provincial Management Plan for Grizzly Bears in Alberta*, which

D. Yelle

confidently recommended that “the provincial grizzly bear population will be increased to 1,000.” The 2004 *Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* was reluctant to use a hard population target.

Why should I care if grizzly bears disappear from Alberta?

Various economic arguments support the importance of grizzly bears in Alberta, but these are not, and should not be, the central focus for campaigns to preserve grizzlies in the province. Advertisers love to use billboard posters of grizzly bears to attract tourists, and it has been shown many times that visitors to Alberta’s parks consider wildlife a primary reason for visiting (and therefore spending money). An unpublished 2000 survey in Banff National Park found that only 15 percent of the respondents would visit the park without grizzly bears. But the contribution of grizzlies to Alberta’s economy is not the reason for protecting them.

The grizzly bear is also often touted as an “umbrella species.” Grizzlies need a large and diverse range to supply all of their needs throughout the year. In Alberta, female grizzlies have home ranges of 152 to 2,932 km²; males require 501 to 4,748 km² (*Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan*). It is possible to generalize to some extent and to say that if an area has a healthy population of grizzlies, then it is likely to also support populations of a number of other species. According to the 2000 Banff Park survey results, 95 percent of respondents believe grizzly bears are essential to the balance of nature and 85 percent believe that a healthy grizzly bear population is an indicator of a healthy ecosystem.

Ultimately it comes to the question “What gives us the right to decide that grizzly bears should be allowed to die out in Alberta?” The government folks are not sitting at their desks thinking, “How can we continue with our campaign to get rid of grizzlies?” But by failing to make changes that the government knows are necessary to sustain grizzly bear populations, it is in effect deciding that grizzly bears are not important enough to protect.

Aren't Alberta's grizzlies OK now that the hunt has been banned?

No. The spring grizzly bear hunt was suspended for three years, starting in 2006. AWA and other groups (including the Grizzly Bear Alliance and Defenders of Wildlife) argued for several years that the government should listen to its own scientists, who had been recommending since 2002 that the hunt should be suspended. Finally the government decided to listen, in no small part because of the hundreds of Albertans who took the time to write or phone to express their disgust at the continuing hunt.

One thing that environmental groups and hunters consistently agree on is that the hunt was not the cause of the grizzly’s troubles and that suspending the hunt was not going to solve these problems. Protecting grizzly bear habitat is the only thing that will help in the long term.

What needs to be done to protect Alberta's grizzlies?

Habitat, habitat, habitat. If grizzlies don’t have secure habitat in which to go about their daily lives, they will die out: it’s as simple as that. Nobody knows why, but grizzlies are considerably more sensitive to human disturbance than black bears (maybe it is because we have already removed them from two-thirds of their historic range). The number one threat to grizzly bear habitat is access. Roads lead to dead grizzly bears, whether it is direct collisions, hunting (legal or illegal), or simply disturbance. The *Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* states that “human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence.” It points out that in the Alberta Central Rockies, 89 percent of human-caused mortalities were within 500 metres of a road on provincial lands.

Grizzlies need large areas of habitat with a wide variety of food sources to keep them going throughout the year. A grizzly is a huge animal, and



Grizzlies doing their part for the Alberta economy.

it needs to eat almost continually in the fall if it is to build up the fat reserves to survive through the winter. If it is continually being disturbed, it will not be in top condition when it comes time to hibernate in the winter. Disturbance may not kill bears directly, but it can reduce their chances of surviving the winter or of breeding successfully the following spring.

The decision on whether or not to do anything to recover grizzly bears is a political one. The provincial Recovery Team detailed what needed to be done in its 2004 *Draft Recovery Plan*. The Alberta government now has to (a) decide that grizzlies are worth recovering and do what the recovery plan suggests or (b) decide that it would rather do nothing and that grizzlies can just take their chances. The three-year delay in implementing the draft plan sends its own messages.

Can we actually recover grizzlies in Alberta?

Yes. The Yellowstone *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* led to the recovery of the grizzly population from an estimated 136 individuals when the grizzly was listed as “threatened” in 1975 to a current population of more than 600 animals. Habitat security was the most important factor in this

recovery (the plan saw more than 1,000 km of roads closed). The Yellowstone plan showed that with sufficient resources and political will, grizzlies can indeed be recovered.

What can I do to help?

If there is one lesson to be learned from the long drawn-out campaign to suspend the spring grizzly bear hunt, it is the fact that whatever the scientific

evidence says, change will only come about as a result of large numbers of Albertans who care enough to have a say. The Grizzly Bear Recovery Team has shown what needs to be done to recover grizzlies: all that is missing now is the political will to do it. You can write to the following:

Your MLA: Find your MLA's contact information at 310-0000 (toll-free) or at http://www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla_home&number=&by.

http://www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla_home&number=&by.

Editor, *Calgary Herald*: letters@theherald.canwest.com

Editor, *Edmonton Journal*: <http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/letters.html>

Honourable Ted Morton
Minister, Sustainable Resource Development
420 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6
Phone: (780) 415-4815
Email: foothills.rockyview@assembly.ab.ca

MINISTER IS THE FINAL OBSTACLE TO GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY IN ALBERTA

Peter Zimmerman made the following statement to Dr. Ted Morton, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, at the Minister's meeting with the Grizzly Bear Recovery Team on June 20, 2007. Zimmerman represents the following organizations on the team: Alberta Wilderness Association, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Grizzly Bear Alliance, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative.

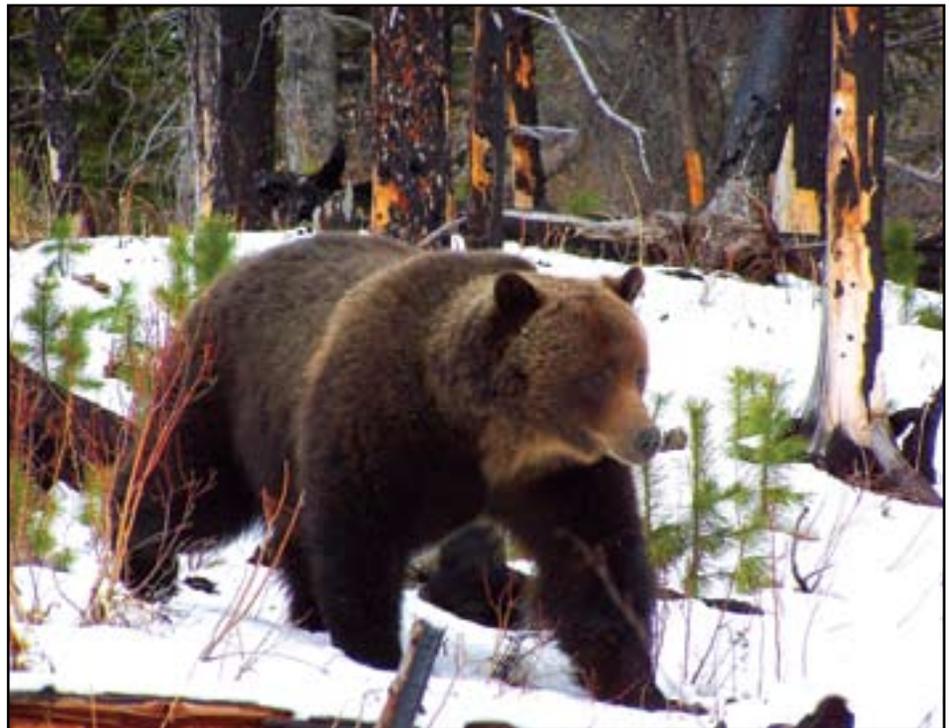
It is not a frequent occurrence when government, the ranching community, forestry sector, oil and gas industries, conservation organizations, and academia all come together with a common action plan to address an urgent environmental and social issue. But that is the case with the current draft of the *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan*. This is a consensus-based plan built by all of these diverse stakeholder groups.

The plan was three years in the making and has now been with the Minister's department for two more years, waiting – we were told – for more definitive population census data. That data is now in and the population numbers are very alarming, to say the least. It is now time to act.

While the suspension of the hunt was a good initial step, it is imperative that the Minister act to implement the plan in its entirety. It is also time for the Minister to act on the Endangered Species Conservation Committee's recommendation to list this species. We believe the situation is urgent, even critical, if we truly wish to recover and sustain a population of grizzly bears in this province.

We are encouraged by the knowledge that Gord Stenhouse has been directed to commence work on the Grizzly Bear Priority Areas, which we see as the heart of this plan. We ask the Minister to ensure sufficient funding

R. Sinclair



and resources to carry on this important next step, as well as all the other components of the recovery plan.

We only have to look south of the border to see what success can be achieved when there is the will, a plan, the funding, and the leadership in place. The Yellowstone grizzly bear population has recovered to the point where it is now being de-listed. While our circumstances are no doubt somewhat different than those in the Yellowstone ecosystem, so is our made-in-Alberta plan. We too can be successful.

Minister, we have the collective will around this table, we have a plan that has been reviewed and vetted by experts – we only need the funding and your leadership to start down our own road to successfully recover this iconic species. But if we don't act immediately, and with the full weight of the plan, our hopes of achieving success will very quickly dim and the grizzly will become one more extirpated species in this province.

That tragic event is something I think no Minister would wish to have happen on his watch.