

GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY TEAM DISBANDED BEFORE GRIZZLY RECOVERY BEGINS

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

The guy on the trail ahead is quivering with excitement, waving his arms at us discreetly but frantically. Is he in trouble? As we draw nearer, he puts his finger to his lips, pointing off to the side of the trail. And then we see it. A large brown back frosted with grey, ambling away from us through the bushes – a grizzly!

The bear comes out into the open 50 feet away. Effortlessly, he rolls a large rock over that would take all of my strength to move. He begins digging, kicking up clumps of earth and snuffling audibly as he picks through the glacier lily roots.

During a hasty whispered conference, we decide to carry on up the trail past the bear. Bear spray at the ready, we edge cautiously along the path, but he keeps his back to us, intent on his foraging. We're close enough to smell him. He turns to give us a quick glance, but he's far too busy to pay us much attention.

Back at camp that evening, we reflect on the moment – what made it so magical was observing such a magnificent animal in his natural environment, minding his own business, just being a bear. What grizzlies need more than anything in Alberta is to be left alone; to have the space to go about their business of being bears.

Unfortunately, this being Alberta, they seem to be no nearer to this goal than they were six years ago when Alberta's grizzly recovery process began. In fact they are much worse off than we thought they were. Detailed genetic population studies over the past four years have seen population estimates drop steadily from 1,000 bears in 2002 to less than 500 today.

So it was with considerable surprise that the provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Team learned in June 2008 that it was being disbanded, its work apparently finished. In a June 10 letter to the Team, Ken Ambrock, Assistant Deputy Minister for Sustainable Resource Development, wrote: "With the finalization of the [Grizzly Recovery] plan, the work of the Recovery Team is complete."



A grizzly bear minding his own business in the Highwood area of Kananaskis Country.

PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS

This was news to the Recovery Team! "The statement that our recovery team's work is complete was a surprise to me," said Dr. Robert Barclay, chair of the Team, in a *Calgary Herald* interview.

The Recovery Team had expected to continue to be involved in the recovery process, as implementation of the newly passed Recovery Plan began. Indeed, the plan itself states, "The Team assists the Minister ... with Plan implementation," and goes on to stress that "the Plan is a dynamic document. The initial life span of the Plan is five years, during which the Team will meet at least annually to review and update the Plan as required."

As things stand, there is a very real risk that the report will be the pinnacle



PHOTO: C. OLSON

of grizzly recovery in Alberta, with none of the necessary habitat protection and restoration – the only thing that will benefit the bears. Grizzlies have benefited little from the recovery process so far. The suspension of the spring grizzly hunt in 2006 – four years and 51 dead bears after government scientists first called for the suspension – certainly helped grizzlies. Counting bears, mapping, and education do nothing in themselves to help the bears.

Dismissal of the Recovery Team sends the message that, with the publishing of the Recovery Plan, the recovery process has run its course. But of course the plan is just 68 pages filled with words, maps, and graphs. In itself it will do nothing to stop the demise of grizzlies in Alberta, nothing to give bears the freedom they need simply to be bears. Surely the work of the Recovery Team is not "complete" – now is the time for the recovery process to begin! 🐾

For more information, check out AWA's Save the Grizzly website at www.savethegrizzly.ca.