



## ALBERTA'S GRIZZLIES: ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY OR JUST ON THE ROAD?

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

**A**lberta's Grizzly Bear Recovery Team was established in 2002 following a recommendation by the Alberta government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee that the grizzly bear should be designated a *threatened* species. The multi-stakeholder team - consisting of government staff, scientists and industry, hunting and environmental representatives - was given two years to draft a provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.

The first draft of the Recovery Plan was submitted in December 2004. It then underwent a prolonged period of internal and external review before it was finally published in March 2008. Two months later, the recovery team was dismissed.

Now, nearly two years after the plan was finally revealed, we ask some of the members of the original Recovery Team to look back and give their impressions of the recovery process. Representatives from the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Alberta Fish and Game Association, the Universities of Alberta and Calgary and the environmental community comment on how the team worked together, how well their discussions were reflected in the final recovery plan, and how far implementation of the plan has gone since then. The representative for the Alberta Forest Products Association declined to be interviewed. Ron Bjorge, Alberta Government Director of Wildlife, also gives his impressions on recovery actions for grizzlies.

**An Expert from the Biological Sciences** Professor Mark Boyce represented the University of Alberta's Department of Biological Sciences on the Recovery Team.

Boyce remembers the Recovery Team meetings as a "painful but ultimately fruitful process." In the beginning, things were difficult: "There was an initial period of knock-down-drag-out," he recalls. "The industry people were difficult to



*The wilder areas of Kananaskis Country, such as the Highwood region, still support grizzly populations. Densities are the lowest in North America, however, and recruitment is low, so they are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance.* PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS

work with and it took hours of meetings." But in spite of this initial friction, or maybe because of it, the Team eventually came together to work in a constructive fashion. "At the end of the day, I was awfully pleased: everyone agreed with the main points. Everyone agreed with the Recovery Plan as it was completed."

One of the most sobering observations from Boyce's perspective was that the main stumbling blocks to progress on grizzly recovery were raised not so much by the industry representatives as by government staff. "The government representatives were as difficult as

the industry people," he remembers. "Even the government people were representatives from Energy, Public Lands and Forestry. They were not biologists with a conservation agenda: they were there to try to protect the paradigm that Alberta is open to business."

Despite all of this, Boyce describes the final Recovery Plan as a "good document" which has the potential to be a successful blueprint for grizzly recovery. "I believe it is a good plan. If we implement it as it is spelled out, we will have grizzly bears for the foreseeable future," he says. Grizzlies themselves are



*Mangi (bear spirit), drawing, 22" x 30" © COLLEEN CAMPBELL*

quite adaptable, Boyce points out, but management has to focus on reducing mortality. "Minimizing conflicts with humans is the bottom line," he says. "If you can keep people from killing them, they'll do well."

Like other Recovery Team members Boyce was taken by surprise when, following the publication of the final Recovery Plan in March 2008, the Recovery Team was disbanded. "The plan was finally accepted, and then a short time after, the Minister disbanded the team," he recalls. "I don't know why he did that. I thought we were in it for the long term." Boyce had fully expected the Team to be involved in the future implementation of the Plan; indeed the Plan specified that the Team "assists the Minister and the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division (FWD) with Plan implementation." That made sense to Boyce: "The group had done all the homework, read the literature. It would have been sensible to keep it going," he says.

Ultimately, a plan is just a plan: by itself it is not going to recover grizzlies. "It's disappointing that it's taken so long for anything to happen," he says. Boyce believes that the secret to grizzly recovery is access management. "I'm not worried about grizzly bears going extinct in Alberta; I'm worried about the degradation of habitat due to roads and industrial development. Roads and bears don't mix."

Boyce believes the 2009 Alberta Land Stewardship Act gives the government everything it needs to recover grizzlies. "But we can't wait for the Land-Use Framework to roll out before anything is done to manage access; there is no reason we can't just do it." There is an erroneous perception that "they can't begin to manage access until they have all of their ducks lined in a row to give them the authority to do so." For example it would be relatively simple for the government to "make it a stipulation of a lease that it has to manage access: access has to be gated."

Boyce remains optimistic that Alberta's grizzlies can be recovered, but is frustrated by the continuing delays. "I think there is no reason why we can't have bears for the long term," he says. "But I'm concerned that it's taking them so long to get regulations in place to actually do the access management." Despite the politics involved, the government's Fish and Wildlife Division has some excellent, well-motivated staff: "A lot of people working for government don't have the Alberta Advantage as their operating plan. There are biologists in the regions who are good people trying to work within political constraints."

But, if the grizzly Recovery Plan is ever to be implemented, it is important to "keep the government's feet to the fire." This needs to come from all of us everyday Albertans: "The public needs to be educated that this needs to happen," he concludes.

## The Energy Industry Perspective

**Rob Staniland** represented the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) on the Recovery Team. At the time he was working with Talisman Energy. He describes himself as "semi-retired" though he still represents CAPP on endangered species processes, including the federal caribou recovery and joint federal/provincial west slope cutthroat trout recovery.

"I liked the recovery process," says Staniland. "There was a lot of agreement at the end of the recovery process. We walked away feeling it was a productive-feeling exercise." The Recovery Plan that came out "accurately reflects where we ended up," he believes. "It included all the relevant things that needed to be done."

When the Recovery Team was disbanded, Staniland appeared less concerned than other members of the Team. "I'm not offended the Team didn't have any role any more," he says. "I took that from the caribou recovery plan: I didn't expect to be intimately involved with the implementation. Alberta doesn't have concrete direction with planning; each process seems to take its own direction." That doesn't mean that he won't be following the implementation of the Plan: "You would like to be able to watch (implementation) to see if they are staying true to the concepts," he says.

Some of the toughest conversations at the Recovery Team table concerned issues of access. "We eventually settled on the fact that the real risk wasn't access but was open access," he emphasizes. If industrial access roads are used only by industrial operators and not for recreation then the problems for grizzlies are considerably less. "From an industry standpoint, grizzlies are manageable with access control." He notes that "there was agreement about density in the context of road density and grizzly mortality: road density is a surrogate for mortality risk but nothing more."

Staniland's biggest concern is that "the intricacies that went into the production of the plan will be lost in a literal interpretation of the words, without consideration of the subtleties." For example, the Recovery Plan talked about managing grizzly Priority Areas with maximum densities for open routes (within this context, an "open route" is defined simply as "A route without restrictions on motorized vehicle use").

But, when the Alberta government held stakeholder meetings to discuss access management for grizzlies, they were only willing to talk about managing access for *trucks* which Staniland believes “is not consistent to how access affects mortality. The Recovery Plan doesn’t distinguish a quad trail from a highway.”

Although the Recovery Plan pointed the finger at human use of access as the primary cause of Alberta’s grizzly troubles how the subsequent recovery process will deal with this problem is another matter. Staniland points to “potential seasonal constraints or maximum traffic restraints,” as examples of tools to begin reducing the impacts of human access. Industry does not see gating of new access as the solution: “Gates are easily compromised, and put the costs up,” points out Staniland. “Closure by regulation” is preferable in his view: “You need to build a situation that’s easy to enforce, and make sure everyone knows the rules. Industry wouldn’t want to enforce (regulations) but could provide support.” Looking south of the border he points out that compliance is good in Utah and Nevada: “In Montana, it took years of targeted enforcement to work.”

Industry is not opposed to any reduction in existing roads networks. “Decommissioning roads is fine if we are permitted to,” says Staniland, pointing out that it is often Alberta Sustainable Resource Development staff who wants to keep them open. But again, he cautions against a “primitive application” of the Recovery Plan. “We imagined in the Conservation Areas, which were chosen because of their lack of roads to start with, they would look at specific roads that were specific hazards, then look at how to abandon just those particular roads.” Bearing in mind future changes within the sector, he also cautions against hasty closure of industrial access roads, giving the example of old oil roads which are now “becoming new gas roads.”

The oil and gas industry’s primary mandate is to develop the sub-surface resources which the Alberta government has sold them. But how the resource is accessed is crucial. Staniland points to “coordinating development” as an important step. This entails coordination between different oil and gas companies as well as between the energy and forestry sectors. More than anything it

is important to be clear exactly what we want to achieve in managing grizzly habitat; we should “plan ahead to know what measures to use, and what you want to control.” As Staniland points out, “you don’t want the economy hurt for no biological value.”

### **Recovery Team Spokesperson and Expert from the Biological Sciences**

**Professor Robert Barclay** from the University of Calgary’s Biological Sciences Department was the second representative from the academic community on the Recovery Team. Dr. Barclay assumed the role of spokesman for the Recovery Team in February 2006. He assumed this duty after government grizzly biologist Gord Stenhouse was removed as Chair of the team for expressing his frustration about the lack of progress in grizzly recovery.

Barclay agrees that involvement in the Recovery Team was very positive: “It was a group with different perspectives and backgrounds but, despite those perspectives and constituencies, the team worked very well together. There were many debates and arguments but in the end we came to consensus. We were unanimous in many recommendations, and when we were not, we understood the consensus.”

Barclay believes the plan itself “accurately reflected the discussions of the recovery team...If the recommendations were adopted,” he says, “I’d be reasonably optimistic about the recovery of grizzly bears in the province.” He is happy to point out that “industry weren’t the roadblock during the production of the plan. The industry reps on the team just wanted to know what the game is; if they know what the limitations are then they’ll work within them.” But there were still certainly obstacles to progress: “Things don’t happen as fast as you would like especially when politics comes into play. It’s at the political and government administrative levels that the pace is set.”

“The most important recommendation (of the Recovery Plan) was to establish core grizzly bear areas and manage access,” says Barclay. “We need areas of high quality habitat where grizzly bears have the ability to maintain themselves and even populate surrounding areas.” Road networks were the key issue. “The need is to reduce human-caused

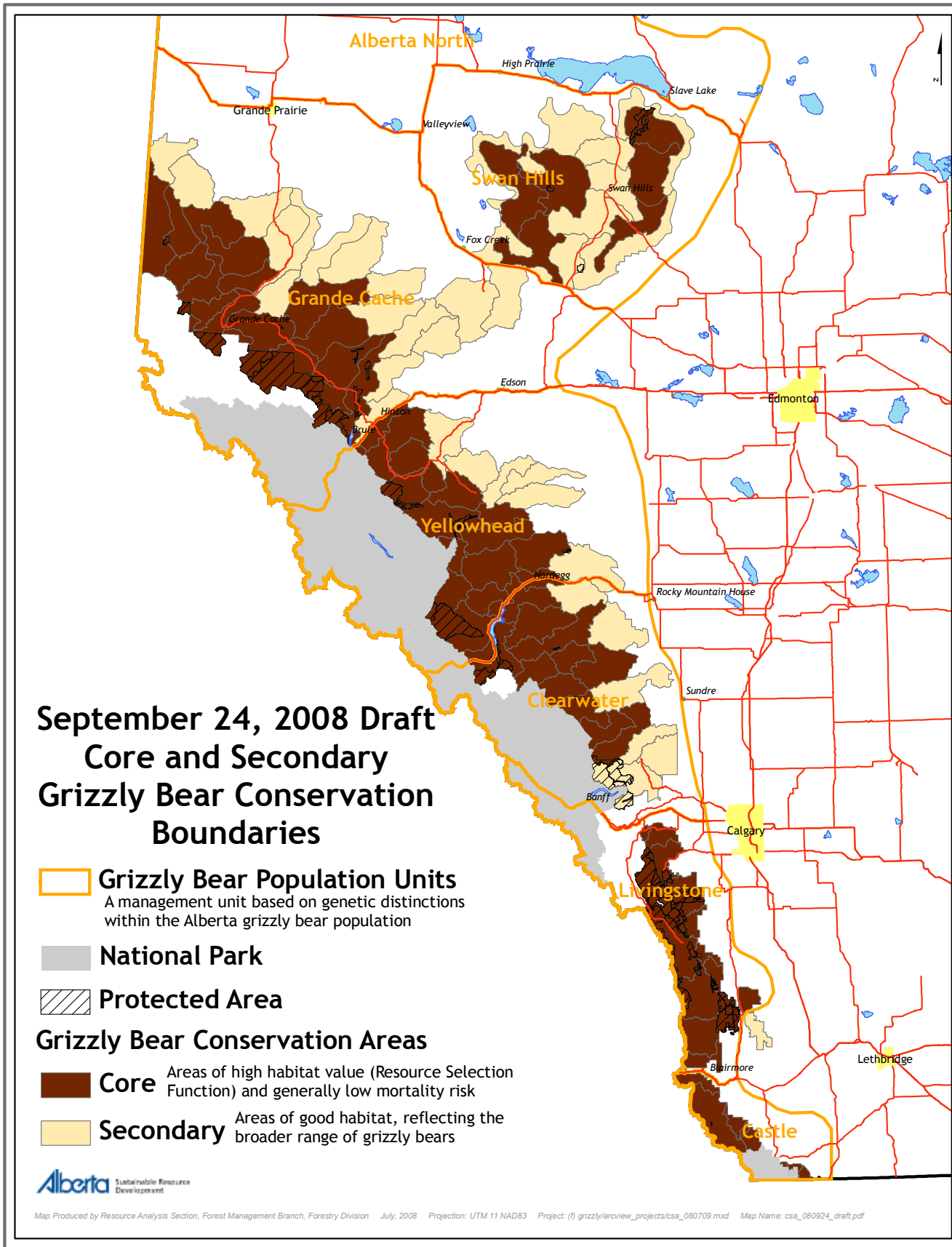
mortality, and one way is to maintain high quality grizzly bear habitat.”

While what needs to be done is clear, whether the will exists to do it is another matter. “I’m less optimistic on the public and political will,” says Barclay. “If there were the public and political will to implement the plan in a timely manner, then we’d have a chance.” Barclay won’t just blame the lack of action on the politicians: “Politicians do what they think public sentiment requires them to do,” he stresses. “The majority of public aren’t committed.”

Although the Recovery Plan did not specifically comment on whether the grizzly should be designated a *threatened* species in Alberta, Barclay believes that the “*threatened* designation is significant.” A new status report is currently being written for Alberta’s grizzlies by an external scientist. When complete it will go to the province’s Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) which will make its listing recommendation (the ESCC recommended in 2002 that the grizzly should be listed as *threatened* but this was never acted upon). “The recommendation going to the minister will have a bearing on the hunt decision,” points out Barclay. “If *threatened* status is recommended then it will be difficult to argue there should be a hunt. It may mean there are more resources put towards conservation management. A lot of the recovery plan recommendations need personnel and resources and this will be easier to argue if ESCC recommends a change in status and if it is acted on.”

Barclay was also taken aback by the summary dismissal of the Recovery Team: “Most people on the Team were surprised. Certainly I was. We expected the Recovery Team would be involved and consulted on the implementation of the plan. We were a good group with a long history.”

Implementation of the plan has been frustratingly slow at times and Barclay acknowledges that there has been a shift in language from government staff from *recovering* grizzlies to *maintaining* them. “We thought there was a recognition that the population was too low, so we needed to recover it to a sustainable level,” he points out. He states unequivocally that: “The population is too small for long-term sustainability. The southern subpopulations are particularly small.



*This draft Alberta Government map was released in 2008, six months after the Recovery Plan was released, and still exists only as a draft. Although the Core Grizzly Bear Conservation Areas were larger than the minimum size recommended in the Recovery Plan, the map also included large areas of grizzly range in the east that were neither Core nor Secondary Areas. At a stroke, a third of grizzly range was removed from the recovery zone.*

The development of human access and the small area south of Highway 1 means that we need to do something fairly quickly.”

For Barclay habitat is key to grizzly recovery; we must “set aside big enough areas to maintain or recover grizzly populations at a sustainable level.” But, he reaffirms he is not convinced that there is the public or political will to do what is necessary to recover the province’s grizzlies. “I’m more pessimistic than optimistic,” he says. “I don’t think we are moving quickly enough to maintain the habitat necessary for a sustainable population; there is continued industrial and recreational pressure in the mountains where grizzly habitat is. I’m not optimistic that we can change public attitudes enough.”

### **The Representative of Hunting/Fishing Interests**

**Andy Boyd** was the Alberta Fish and Game Association representative on the Recovery Team.

Like Mark Boyce, Andy Boyd points to the early difficulties on the Recovery Team but is impressed by how the Team worked through its initial differences. “Various members of the committee had their own agendas, and of course you have to expect that in the beginning,” he says. “But in the end we hashed things through. A couple of issues we didn’t have full agreement on, but it was impressive to come up with such a strong recovery plan.”

Boyd was also surprised with the disbanding of the Recovery Team once the Recovery Plan was released. Though writing the plan was the primary reason for the Team’s existence the Plan refers to ongoing monitoring throughout. “We’d expected,” he says, “to be actively involved in the implementation of the plan and recovery efforts. That was a bit of a surprise. The consolation prize was supposed to be annual updates but that never seemed to happen.”

Implementation of the Plan has “played out like I would have expected, given the political realities in Alberta,” says Boyd. “The hunt has been suspended; Bear Smart programs are there, though not as comprehensive as some would like. There has been some effort to come up with access management recommendations. But it needs a commitment to ongoing monitoring of population levels and

### **Government of Alberta**

As Dr. Mark Boyce recognizes, the government’s Fish and Wildlife Division has some excellent, well-motivated staff. Ron Bjorge, Director of Wildlife for Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, recognizes that “people always want things to happen quicker,” but is keen to point out the progress that has already been made on grizzly recovery. “We’ve made good progress on estimating populations,” he says “and that’s fed into the process to reassess status, which is moving along well.” (A status review by an independent scientist will go to the province’s Endangered Species Conservation Committee, which will then make a status recommendation – endangered, threatened or stable for example – to the Minister). “We don’t have trend data on bears but we do have a baseline.”

Other government actions include making significant strides in data management, reviewing compensation programs for livestock loss, and establishing core and secondary grizzly areas. In those areas, “we are wrestling with how to manage activities there.” A multi-stakeholder team met in October 2008 to discuss access management and a government response to that process should be released relatively soon.

Bjorge also points to the Bear Smart program: “a proactive program to keep bears alive on the landscape.” The province now has a provincial carnivore specialist whose duties include running the Bear Smart program.

Bjorge believes that “there’s a lot of things on the go” and emphasizes “bears are a big priority for us. In the long run I’m optimistic. I believe we can do what’s required for bears in Alberta.”

trends.” Boyd believes the five years of DNA population studies which ended in 2009 were desperately needed: “they were a big step forward.” But, he goes on to say that the work is not finished: “It needs follow up to identify the trends. It needs ongoing monitoring – not necessarily the same effort as the last five years – but we need reliable scientific data.” Boyd was not surprised that grizzly numbers in the Grande Cache area were found to be higher than had been predicted – “I thought the previous estimates were low.” But he also expresses considerable concern at some of the population findings further south: “Some of the numbers from the middle foothills were dismally low: hundreds of square kilometres of good habitat with few bears in.”

Boyd is also concerned about changes to the plan since it was publicly released: “I was shocked at the changes that were made to the plan after it had been passed, particularly the changes to core and secondary areas. It wasn’t my perception of what had been said.” The map (see above) that came out later showed core areas as a continual strip running up Alberta’s foothills; these areas would have maximum road density targets. “To restrict motorized access within these areas was impractical, a step backwards,” Boyd believes. “You wouldn’t get compliance from industry and there would

be kickback from motorized interests.”

Some of the most heated discussions within the Recovery Team concerned access management. While some were adamant that roads and access routes were the critical issue, others (principally the industrial and government representatives) argued that the roads themselves were not the problem: it was how the roads were used (see Rob Staniland). The compromise in the final Recovery Plan eventually became “human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence.” Boyd believes the basic argument (that roads aren’t the problem: it’s access on the roads that is the problem). But he goes on to say that “industrial access still degrades the quality of the habitat though there may be some improvement for grizzlies. It still impacts the wilderness character of the area. Gating roads and having no public access is a viable argument if that’s your only concern.” He gives the example of the Cold Lake area, which has lots of industrial activity but no public access.

Like Boyce, Boyd agrees that the Land-Use Framework “could be a very powerful planning process if ALSA (the Alberta Land Stewardship Act) is used to its full extent.” That is obviously quite a big “if”.

## An Environmentalist Perspective

Peter Zimmerman's tenure on the Recovery Team was an unusual one. As a BP Canada employee, he initially sat on the Team as a representative of the Canadian Association for Petroleum Producers. When he left his position with BP, he was allowed to remain on the team as a non-voting member, representing four environmental organizations: AWA, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yellowstone to Yukon and the Grizzly Bear Alliance. (The Federation of Alberta Naturalists had its own representative on the team).

"The entire process was painfully slow and frustrating," remembers Zimmerman, "especially near the close when our draft report sat for months without any action." He questions how committed the government really was (and still is) to the process: "My sense was that the politicians, and to some degree even the Wildlife Director steering the effort, by and large either did not think this was a very important issue, simply did not believe their own researchers' science, or did not have the courage to go against the hunting lobby," he says.

He feels the final plan was "probably as good as we might expect given the different perspectives and interests. I think by and large it was a true reflection of the input given." Zimmerman describes the dismissal of the Team as "a big let down. It was, both in spirit and in fact, very much at odds with both the report itself and the intent of the legislation."

Zimmerman does see some progress since the plan was completed. "One very positive outcome was some excellent models and mapping products have been developed which should be a great help in setting management strategies," he says. "We also finally arrived at some solid census numbers that are pretty much indisputable." But none of these outcomes actually benefit grizzlies themselves, and he remains strongly critical of the lack of any concrete recovery actions. "I was ultimately very disappointed with how the plan has been implemented," he laments. "The central issue of access control has never been satisfactorily addressed, although some of the more minor recommendations have been acted on."

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Although the Recovery Team was made up of a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of interests, it is notable how consistent the members I interviewed are in their memories of the Recovery Plan process. They all recognize how well the Team worked together and are proud of the final Recovery Plan they produced. All of the members interviewed maintain a keen interest in how their plan will be implemented and seem determined to ensure that future grizzly management stays true to the intent of the plan.

Opinion seems almost unanimous that motorized access in grizzly habitat is the main concern and that, if grizzlies are ever to be "recovered," this is the

issue that will have to be dealt with on a practical landscape level. There is certainly frustration that action has been slow since the plan was passed in 2008. But they are mostly confident that, if the language and principles of the Recovery Plan are respected, grizzlies will persist on the landscape into the future. At the same time, there is a distinct nervousness and an uncertainty about whether the political and public will truly exists to ensure that the plan is actually implemented. Without the will to implement it, after all, the plan is just so much paper.

AWA agrees that, to a large degree, the story told from this point forward is up to us, the Alberta public. AWA is concerned that messaging from the Alberta government has showed a distinct shift away from "recovering" grizzlies to "maintaining" them. But as Robert Barclay says: "Politicians do what they think public sentiment requires them to do." Too few politicians have ever had a constituent knock on their door because they want to talk about their concerns about grizzlies. Too few MLAs have ever received a phone call from a voter asking that they do more to help protect grizzly habitat. But these actions are exactly what is needed. It would be a tragedy if we allowed grizzlies to disappear from Alberta – and this remains a distinct possibility, particularly in the south of the province – because we cared for them a bit, but not enough to do anything about it. Now it really is up to us. 🐾

## Excerpt from Alberta's Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan

The Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan 2008-2013 was finally published in March 2008. The plan notes that: "In 2002, the Endangered Species Conservation Committee recommended that the Alberta grizzly bear population be designated as *Threatened*. This recommendation was based on the grizzly bear's small population size, slow reproductive rate, limited immigration from populations outside Alberta, and increasing human activity on the landscape."

The plan is clear that "human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence." (emphasis in original)

- Key recommendations of the recovery plan include:
- "Reduce human-caused grizzly bear mortality by changing human-use of the landscape, including:
    - o Controlling access development and use, and other human activities in grizzly bear habitat
    - o Temporary suspension of hunting as an immediate measure while other recovery actions are implemented

- Determine grizzly bear population size and continue ongoing collection and monitoring of key data
- Create Grizzly Bear Priority Areas in each population unit to protect high quality habitat and reduce risk from humans
- Reduce human/bear conflicts by working with people and managing attractants to minimize adverse bear behaviour
- Acquire new funding to support additional government staff (create a grizzly bear recovery coordinator position, enforce regulations regarding attractant storage and access use, support conflict management and education, support ongoing inventory and habitat mapping, and assist with integration of grizzly bear conservation needs into land use planning and land use decisions)
- Involve land users and stakeholders in implementation of the recovery plan, including improved communication with, and compensation for, ranchers."

*The full Recovery Plan may be seen on AWA's website at [www.albertawilderness.ca/issues/wildlife/grizzly-bears/archive](http://www.albertawilderness.ca/issues/wildlife/grizzly-bears/archive)*