

Grizzlies need our protection

By Nigel Douglas, For The Calgary Herald, March 11, 2010 7:14 AM

Warm and sunny March days like these are often enough to awaken slumbering grizzly bears from their hibernation, if only temporarily. Some bears will emerge for short periods to make the most of the unseasonably warm weather, but a cold snap will likely send them back to their dens to resume their interrupted sleep. Grizzly cubs will also have been born over the cold winter months, but this spring they will be emerging to face an uncertain future.

On March 12, the province's Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) will be meeting to decide on its recommendation to the Alberta government on the bruin's future status. A recommendation of threatened status seems the most likely outcome and, on the surface, this looks like good news for the province's grizzlies.

But of course this is Alberta, and we have been here before. In 2002, it was the ESCC's first recommendation for threatened designation that began the province's long, drawn-out grizzly recovery saga. At the time there were believed to be 1,000 bears in Alberta, and this was a low enough number to sound the alarm bells.

The province's recently released Status of the Grizzly Bear report now pegs the province's grizzly population at 691 (not including bits of Banff and Jasper National Parks). The report underlines a lot of what we already knew. Grizzlies are struggling throughout most of Alberta: "A large area of grizzly habitat, particularly south of Highway 16, currently appears to be a population sink." But the good news is that we know what the problem is and we know how to fix it: "To reduce mortality, motorized access to bear habitat must be minimized and human activities that lead to conflicts with bears must be mitigated."

So the scientists are clear what needs to be done and, according to the Herald's recent online poll, Albertans are right behind them. In response to the question, "With a population count of 691, should grizzly bears be designated a threatened species in Alberta?" a resounding 81 per cent of respondents said "yes." Now all that is needed is for the politicians to catch up and join the parade.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little political appetite to protect grizzly habitat, and the current Minister of Sustainable Resource Development is even under considerable pressure to reinstate a hunt. Because grizzly numbers in just one out of the six grizzly management areas are healthy (the one with the most protected habitat), some are treating this as a justification for hunting them. Some of the old discredited arguments in favour of a hunt are being wheeled out again, including claims that we need to hunt bears to make them wary of people. (Hunting grizzlies does not make bears wary of people; it makes them dead).

Incredibly, the Minister has still not ruled out a return to a hunt this spring. Maybe the new Status Report will help convince him: "Given the large numbers of uncertainties involved, the

precautionary approach is to conclude that currently the population is likely slowly declining and may not sustain any additional human-caused mortality."

Looking at the bigger picture, of course, it was clear right from the beginning that the grizzly hunt was not the cause of Alberta's grizzly woes, and suspending the hunt was never going to be the solution. What grizzly bears need is secure habitat; places where they can be left alone to go about their business of being grizzly bears.

Unfortunately, eight years on from the province's Endangered Species Conservation Committee's first recommendation to designate grizzlies as threatened, no new habitat has been protected. Our knowledge about grizzlies has certainly improved in that time. We know that there are a lot fewer bears than we thought there were, for example, and mapping of grizzly habitat has provided us with a clearer picture than ever before of what grizzlies need; where they live and also where they die. We know that grizzlies are in trouble, we know why and we know exactly what we need to do to help them recover.

But not much of this knowledge has helped the grizzlies themselves. There has been a certain amount of progress. A multi-stakeholder Recovery Team worked for four years to put together a Recovery Plan, which was officially passed in 2008. The grizzly hunt was finally suspended in 2006. State-of-the-art DNA studies have given us a better picture than ever before of grizzly numbers, and grizzly habitat has been mapped with unprecedented accuracy.

These are all small steps along the way to beginning to recover grizzlies. But with the exception of the temporary hunt suspension, none of this actually benefits grizzlies and their habitat. Only when the province begins to take serious measures to protect core grizzly habitat, and to reduce levels of motorized access in grizzly range, will the grizzly decline be halted. We look forward to day when Alberta's grizzly recovery can really begin.

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