
The future of Alberta's grizzlies should be informed by science, not fear

In 2008, the *Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Strategy* was approved and published, the culmination of years of research and hard work by scientists across the province and North America. Adopted as a precursor to designating the grizzly as *threatened* in Alberta, the recovery strategy contains good science and should be a strong guiding document. Now, however, there have been calls to essentially throw that science out and resume the grizzly hunt. This rash proposal would defy the recovery strategy's required.

A small number of landowners in southwestern Alberta have recently raised concerns about safety risks posed by grizzlies on their properties. By way of justification they have cited anecdotal reports of increased grizzly sightings in that area during the summer of 2012. They've gone on to suggest that bear-human conflicts could be resolved by permitting the shooting of "problem" bears, effectively re-introducing the hunt.

While AWA understands and sympathizes with the concerns faced by these landowners we cannot agree that allowing the shooting of bears is in any way an appropriate preventative response to potential conflicts.

First, one thing these reports have in

common is the inability to address the reasons why people are seeing more bears.

Traditional grizzly habitat in Alberta's forests and public lands is under well-known pressures from logging and other industrial development. The lands where these bears used to forage, hunt, and mate is becoming severely degraded. It shouldn't be surprising then to see grizzlies wander onto relatively well-kept private ranches instead.

This highlights the importance of the provincial government taking a strong stance and properly managing our forests so that grizzlies aren't pushed onto private lands. It should not be up to the ranchers, farmers, and other landowners to deal with concerns arising from the government's negligent approach to managing public lands.

We might also be seeing more grizzlies here because the species is doing much better in Montana; it makes sense that some would be wandering north across the border.

Second, regarding the reports of increased grizzly sightings, they remain for now simply that: reports. They do not constitute any sort of proper, scientific study by which one can make an informed population estimate. Nor do they mean that conflict necessarily follows. In Appendix 1 to the recovery strategy, the Government of Alberta made it a policy that provincial popula-

tions will be increased to a sustainable level of 1,000 bears. The last census showed only 700 grizzlies in Alberta and there is no scientific evidence to suggest that numbers are anywhere near the sustainable threshold. The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) is currently conducting a five-year population census using DNA samples taken from bear rub trees. So far, only preliminary results have emerged from that study and the figure of approximately 700 bears remains what we have to work with.

In addition to establishing a sustainable population Appendix 1 requires a review of the population estimate in relation to the spatial distribution of grizzlies within the Bear Management Area and adjacent jurisdiction before resuming a grizzly hunt should even be considered. It also requires that the rate of human-caused mortality over the past six years remain below four percent.

This is not an exhaustive list of the conditions demanded in Appendix 1, but it does include a sampling of the research that still needs to be completed before any resumption of the hunt can be considered.

On these points, we agree with Minister McQueen of AESRD who has assured us that “the Government of Alberta is committed to sustaining grizzly bear populations over the long-term and is not considering grizzly bear hunting opportunities.”

AWA appreciates this reassurance and reiterates here the point we’ve made to AESRD: Instead of a hunt, we would like to see more resources put towards BearSmart

and other human-bear conflict avoidance programs. These programs work and make a difference in communities where they have taken hold.

If anything, these programs show that humans and bears can live on the landscape together.

Many of the “problem bears” that have had to be relocated or euthanized have become that way due to poor materials storage and garbage-management practices. Where programs are in place to educate ranchers and to provide alternative storage and disposal options, grizzlies and humans can live together with minimal conflict. We strongly encourage of the government to pour more resources into this kind of program as an alternative to having to deal with “problem bears.” We *especially* encourage this path as an alternative to any rash, ill-considered resumption of the grizzly hunt.

Finally, AWA was also advised by Minister McQueen that the Recovery Strategy, which is due to expire at the end of 2013, will be updated then. This update will include “new information and research (they) have gathered since the current plan was finalized.” This new information will include the improved population estimates from the aforementioned bear rub study as well as evidence regarding “population connectivity with adjacent jurisdictions.”

AWA looks forward to working with AESRD and other ENGOs on this update to the Grizzly Recovery Strategy.

- Sean Nichols