

Back to the Future for the Bears:

ANOTHER FIVE YEARS FOR ALBERTA'S GRIZZLY RECOVERY PLAN

by SEAN NICHOLS, AWA Conservation Specialist

In April 2008, following years of hard work and informed by some very good science, the Government of Alberta (GoA) approved the Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan 2008-2013. This document accompanied the listing of the grizzly as Threatened in Alberta and was intended to provide a blueprint for recovering the species to sustainable levels. As with all species recovery plans in Alberta, a five-year time frame was explicitly built into the document. This time frame expires at the end of this year and so the plan is now up for review and renewal.

Looking back over the last five years of grizzly recovery efforts, what do we then see? Like Marty McFly discovered when he voyaged back in time in the movie "Back to the Future," taking a trip to 2008 shows that sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same.

In June 2008, barely two months following the approval of the recovery plan, the government disbanded the recovery team that was expected to implement the plan. In a news release following that action, AWA's Nigel Douglas wrote: "Everybody believed that it would be the role of the Recovery Team to see that (the Recovery Plan) was actually implemented. Six years of grizzly recovery has resulted in a 68-page plan, a suspension of the grizzly hunt and more than \$2 million spent on counting bears. Unfortunately it has also seen precisely nothing done to protect grizzly bear habitat."

Some striking parallels can be drawn between that statement and the situation today. While the plan remains in effect until the end of the year (and is anticipated to be renewed for another five years early in 2014), and the grizzly hunt remains suspended, we are still counting grizzlies in Alberta and actual grizzly habitat in the province remains just as open to disturbance and fragmentation as it was in 2008.

To be sure, there has been some good work done with conflict avoidance and attractant management. However without a dedicated recovery team in place, such efforts have been patchwork across the province and highly dependent on the efforts of one or two key local, dedicated volunteers.

In November 2008 AWA and other ENGOs across the province participated in a series of GoA workshops on human access management that resulted in a number of excellent recommendations. These recommendations echoed and expanded on those found in the Recovery Plan calling for specific limits of 0.6 km/km² (in core grizzly habitat) and 1.2 km/km² (in secondary grizzly habitat) on the density of open routes (including roads, railroads, cut lines, pipelines, etc.) into grizzly habitat. In the five years since then, AWA and other participants have called on the government to officially release the results of those workshops. For five years the government has stonewalled.

Despite assurances that the workshop results feature in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) and other pieces of government policy, for all practical purposes, those recommendations have disappeared into a regulatory "black hole."

SO WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE THE RECOVERY PLAN?

There may be some light on the horizon. Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) has committed to renewing the plan for another five years. In a meeting last October with AESRD Minister McQueen, AWA was informed that it would be renewed with only minor changes; however it now seems that the changes may end up being more substantial.

Will the changes be good news or bad news? AWA believes there is cause for cautious optimism. Members of the original recovery team are being consulted on the plan's renewal, as are wildlife and land managers. AWA hopes this will result in closer cooperation between land managers and the field staff responsible for implementing the plan. Issues such as access management are being explicitly re-addressed and are expected to be surrounded with "stronger language," including clarity on the definition of what constitutes open routes. This definition has not always been consistently applied by all parties, a

matter of some contention in recent years.

Perhaps most importantly, the Recovery Plan renewal will take place more-or-less in conjunction with the unveiling of the SSRP. AWA is pleased to see the draft plan recognize the need to reduce greatly the linear footprint in headwaters and grizzly habitat. The same linear access threshold numbers described above appear in not only the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, but also in literature describing habitat requirements for other species throughout Alberta's Eastern Slopes. An increasing body of science is arriving at the same conclusion – that similar limits on access density are important for ecosystem intactness across the board. Unlike in 2008, there is now scientific data from Alberta supporting this conclusion.

Other aspects of the recovery plan may be overhauled as well: one is the introduction of a “social component” to the plan. This component would recognize explicitly that a recovery in population numbers is not sufficient. This must be accompanied by public support for the ideals behind grizzly bear conservation.

There are also some more questionable changes being mooted for the plan's update: specifically the introduction of management zones. Grizzly habitat would be divided into zones ranging from a Recovery Zone – where grizzly population recovery would be considered paramount – through to a Dispersal Zone – where the presence of grizzlies would not be required. The understandable intent behind the zones would be to prioritize limited staff resources. However the ramifications may be cause for concern:

since a grizzly in the Dispersal Zone would no longer be contributing to its population, then any mortality in the Dispersal Zones would not count toward mortality numbers in the associated Bear Management Area (BMA). This general approach has been used with some success in other jurisdictions (notably in the USA), but the contextual specifics of the Alberta approach gives AWA pause.

The details of these and other anticipated changes to the Recovery Plan have yet to be revealed. A draft version of the updated plan is expected out near the end of this

year (after the draft SSRP has been released), with a public feedback period stretching into early 2014. The final release of the Plan, updated for the next five years, would follow. In the meantime, the existing Recovery Plan from 2008, will continue to be in effect.

So in a sense, we're back where we started. But like what Marty McFly was given in his return to the past, there's an opportunity now to try again. We will have the opportunity to make changes that will promise a brighter future for Alberta's Threatened grizzlies. ♣



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