

# Between the lines:

## What America's grizzly bear recovery expert said – and did not say – about Alberta's (ho-hum) attempts to recover the Great Bear

By Jim Pissot, MSc, Director, WildCanada Conservation Alliance

**"I**t always takes a very long time."

Dr. Chris Servheen knows a thing or two about grizzly bear recovery. Or, maybe, 34 things (one for each year he has been working to recover the great bear in the US Northern Rockies). Servheen currently is the coordinator of the grizzly bear recovery strategy for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. At the centre of Servheen's three-decade experience is a clear conclusion. Managing humans is a lot more difficult than managing grizzly bears. And "managing" humans is what grizzly bear recovery is all about. He spoke to participants at the May 2014 Western Black Bear Workshop in Canmore about the US grizzly bear recovery strategy.

In 1975, US grizzlies were listed as "threatened" in the lower 48 states, where there were fewer than 700 bears and only 136 in Yellowstone National Park ("fewer than 700" ... sound familiar?). The reasons for the listing included range reduction, habitat conflicts (due to livestock, logging, and road-building), illegal killing, and isolated population (sound familiar?). Recovery under Dr. Servheen's direction (guided by legal requirements and public consultation) emphasized reducing grizzly mortality (especially females), habitat security (particularly by closing "roads" and restricting motorized access), reducing conflicts (largely with ranchers and recreationists), and eliminating attractants (focusing on community garbage dumps).

But the multiple federal, state, and local agencies were unaccustomed to conservation cooperation and reluctant to partner

with the US Fish and Wildlife Service until they all finally agreed to work together under the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. Plenty of time, effort and money were spent to understand and address the concerns of ranchers, farmers, communities, and others in and adjacent to the grizzly recovery area.

Servheen noted that preventing conflicts proved much more productive than dealing with them after the fact. So, working with ranchers and other landowners, the recovery team helped to remove livestock carcasses, provide electric fencing (for bee yards and other attractants), pen vulnerable livestock at appropriate times, and distribute roadkill and other carcasses in protected areas far from livestock operations.

Grizzly bear recovery is succeeding in the U.S. because four strong legs support the American institutional table. First, ongoing research provides needed biological and contextual data. Second, the popular visibility of grizzly recovery, and a reluctance to be tagged with failure, generated the necessary political will at and support from the very top of government agencies. Third, key departments, organizations, and individuals came to the table as a team. Finally, **public support** was cultivated through reliable information and consistent messaging from the recovery team, and – most importantly – the team's success in meeting the needs of people living in the region. According to Servheen, the failure of any single leg will cause the recovery table to collapse.

Without these legs Alberta's recovery table has collapsed. When Dr. Servheen

spoke five years ago at the Society for Conservation Biology conference in Edmonton, he emphasized the need to restrict vehicles, close roads, and provide secure habitat for grizzlies. Implicit in his emphasis was the recognition that Alberta was failing even to come close. When questioned about Alberta's recovery efforts this year, Servheen praised the efforts of good provincial men and women in the field. Many of us in the audience noted that he acknowledged field efforts without commenting on the quality of leadership from Edmonton. There is no question that, to date at least, Alberta's grizzlies have not enjoyed support from ministers, MLAs or the office of the Premier. I hope that will change under Premier Notley and Minister Phillips.

But Dr. Servheen left us on a hopeful note. Grizzly recovery appeared close to hopeful when he began 34 years ago. Then institutional legs were built under the recovery table. Bears began to respond slowly to good management. The recovery team worked to reconcile human needs with grizzly recovery. Long-term, constantly steady, efforts began to pay off. Recovery always takes a very long time.

Meanwhile, here in Alberta, we have pushed for a very long time just to suspend the hunt and launch grizzly bear recovery. But we have good bear data, there is progress with willing ranchers in the foothills, and provincial BearSmart efforts are moving forward. So let's imagine where we'll be 34 years from the beginning of our own recovery plan. 2041 is not that far off. Grizzly bear recovery is possible. And, of course, it's worth it. 🐾