

Grizzly Bear Management in Alberta:

Jumping the Gun on Grizzlies

By Devon Earl, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



Last spring, you may have heard Alberta Environment and Parks Minister Jason Nixon proudly exclaim that our grizzly bear population in Alberta is “thriving.” This strong language comes from some recent bear population inventories, which indicate that grizzly populations in certain areas may be increasing. This is particularly true for Bear Management Area 4 (Clearwater, East of Banff National Park), where the population estimate went from 47 in 2005 to 88 in 2018. However, this is just one of seven bear management areas (BMAs) in the province.

We have never had a very confident estimate of how many grizzly bears live in Alberta. Since the early 2000s, bear population monitoring has been done sporadically in various BMAs, by numerous groups in different years. In 2010, the best guess at the grizzly bear population in the province was 700-800 bears, given that not all BMAs had a population estimate. BMAs 3 through 6 have now each been assessed twice, and estimates indicate that these populations are stable or increasing. However, differences in methodologies between years shed some doubt on these conclusions. In any case, the first population estimate in BMA 7 (Swan Hills) was just done in 2018 (published in 2021), and up until then we had little idea how many bears lived there. The first population estimate for BMA 1 (Chinchaga), was published in 2019, but was not included in the 2020 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.

Although the stable or increasing grizzly bear population estimates

in certain BMAs are encouraging, AWA urges caution when making assumptions about the Alberta grizzly population. Just because the population in Banff has increased from an estimated 47 to 88 individuals (still a small population) doesn't mean the entire provincial population is “thriving”. As mentioned above, we don't even have the data available to be able to compare populations over time in many BMAs. Additionally, grizzly bear recovery planning in the province is far from reassuring.

The first *Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* was published in 2008 after Alberta's Endangered Species Conservation Committee recommended that the species be listed as at-risk under the 2002 *Wildlife Act*. Grizzly bears were finally designated as a threatened species in 2010, and the recovery plan was meant to be updated in 2013. The deadline to update the plan came and went, and the next draft of the recovery plan was not released for public comment until 2016, three years after it was scheduled to be replaced. After the public comment period, not a word was heard about the final version of the plan until March 2021, when the finalised recovery plan (dated July 2020) was quietly posted on the Government of Alberta website. At the time of posting, the recovery plan didn't even include the most recent population estimates – which were posted in February 2021.

Not only was the recovery plan eight years behind schedule, but it was largely unchanged from the 2016 draft plan. Some positive aspects to this plan include a commitment to hiring full time human-

bear conflict officers, continuing to monitor bear populations and generate updated population estimates, and a commitment to encouraging population connectivity by creating a buffer around highway 3 and building crossing structures. However, if it takes five years to take a draft plan and publish it, I wonder how many years it will take to implement these actions. Additionally, the recovery plan falls short in several key areas – notably in linear disturbance limits.

The 2008 recovery plan set science-based limits on the amount of linear disturbance (roads, trails, and seismic lines) that should be allowed in core grizzly bear habitat. The 2016 draft and 2020 recovery plan scrapped that idea, and instead set limits on ‘open road density.’ Open roads make up a smaller portion of linear disturbance, so this change will allow more linear features and more human access in grizzly bear habitat. The apparent rationale for this change is a study that indicated that the majority of grizzly bear mortality in Alberta occurred within 500 metres of an open road. This research doesn't take into account any other effects that linear disturbance could have on grizzlies, such as the bears avoiding areas with seismic lines or high trail densities which leads to finding less food or fewer mating opportunities, and a lower overall fitness. Given that the greatest contributor to bear mortality is through human contact, limiting all linear features that people use to access bear country makes sense. This is supported by research conducted in the United States. Changing the linear density limits from all linear disturbance to only open

roads caters to industry and allows further destruction of grizzly habitat.

Speaking of habitat destruction, the recovery plan mentions logging as a potential reason for increasing grizzly bear populations, because of the potential that regenerating cutblocks provide food for bears. A study by Stenhouse et al. (2015) is cited, even though it did not measure the effect of logging on grizzly bear food. This narrative greenwashes our logging industry - convincing the public that logging practices benefit the environment when in fact they do not. Additionally, grizzly bear conservation is not just about grizzlies. Grizzly bears require large amounts of intact habitat to survive, and protecting this habitat benefits the many other species that are equally important to our ecosystems.

Although bear population estimates in some areas are encouraging, we can't yet

assume that grizzly bears are out of the woods, so to speak. One major concern with these estimates is that some trophy hunters may start to push to bring back the grizzly bear hunt in Alberta. The grizzly bear hunt ended in 2006 following the 2002 recommendations of the first committee on the recovery of the grizzly bear.

Mitigating and reducing conflicts between grizzly bears and people is essential to recovery and coexistence. While most people appreciate having a healthy bear population on the landscape, some may also be concerned about increasing conflicts between bears and people. However, a recovering grizzly bear population does not have to mean more conflicts. Successful programs exist throughout the province to reduce the number of negative encounters between people and bears.

One such program is the Carnivores and Communities Program (CACP) of the Waterton Biosphere Reserve. Working in southwestern Alberta since 2009, the CACP focuses on managing attractants in agriculture to reduce conflicts with bears that may lead to euthanasia of the bear, damage to property or livestock, or human safety issues.

Prior to grizzly bears being listed as threatened, some landowners in southwestern Alberta reported seeing more bears on the landscape and experiencing more conflicts with grizzly bears getting into their grain stores, killing livestock or getting into deadstock. This could be because human development and disturbance in bear habitat has led to bears entering agricultural areas in search of food, having been displaced from habitats that they would otherwise occupy. Even though these conflicts exist, Albertans recognise that both people and grizzly bears can have a place on the landscape, which is where the work of the CACP comes in. Some of the projects carried out by this group include securing grain, feed and garbage in bear-proof containers, installing electric fencing, removing deadstock and carcass composting. To date, the CACP has completed over 100 of these attractant management projects – a feat that indicates that Albertans are indeed interested in finding ways to live harmoniously with these impressive creatures that represent a valued part of our province.

Proper reduction and mitigation of conflicts, along with improved management and continued monitoring and research of our province's grizzlies is a path to sustained recovery and maintenance of this species on the landscape. AWA hopes to see more action from the government on grizzly recovery including the implementation of linear disturbance limits in core grizzly habitat. We are encouraged by the steps that have been taken in monitoring and research and the work by groups such as the CACP to lead the way towards healthy coexistence between people and grizzly bears. 🐻



Even without the hunt, humans represent the greatest cause of grizzly bear mortality. Grizzlies who become accustomed to human food, or who come in contact with people, are seen as a hazard and often euthanised. With low population numbers in most BMAs, losing any individual grizzly bear can be a significant blow to the population. Photo © C. Olson