

# Endangered Species UPDATE

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# Bitterroot Grizzly Recovery: A Community-Based Alternative

Mike Roy and Hank Fischer

Scientists and advocates agree that recovery of the threatened grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) can only be achieved if its range and numbers are expanded. For over twenty years, conservation efforts have focused on stabilizing existing bear populations in the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide (Glacier National Park/Bob Marshall Wilderness) Ecosystems. Yet even these programs in parks and other protected areas have alienated many resource users and local citizens.

How can local residents of potential reintroduction areas be convinced that the presence of grizzlies on the public and private lands surrounding their communities will not jeopardize their livelihoods—or even their personal safety? The answer may lie in a new collaborative approach being proposed by commodity and conservation groups to restore the grizzly to its former range in the Bitterroot Ecosystem of western Montana and central Idaho. This approach—which will require an unprecedented level of trust between conservationists, agency officials, and members of rural communities—seeks to recover bears, minimize impacts on lo-

cal economies, and give citizens a larger voice in grizzly management.

## Background

Since the grizzly bear was first listed as "threatened" in 1975, conservation efforts—as outlined in the recent Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993)—have focused on stabilization of declining populations in four ecosystems in the northern Rockies, reduction of human-caused mortality, improvement of sanitation practices, and enhancement of public education. Strategies to address these critical problems are now in place. New grizzly conservation concerns include fragmentation of grizzly range, effectiveness of corridors, and genetic integrity of bear populations (Servheen and Sandstrom 1993).

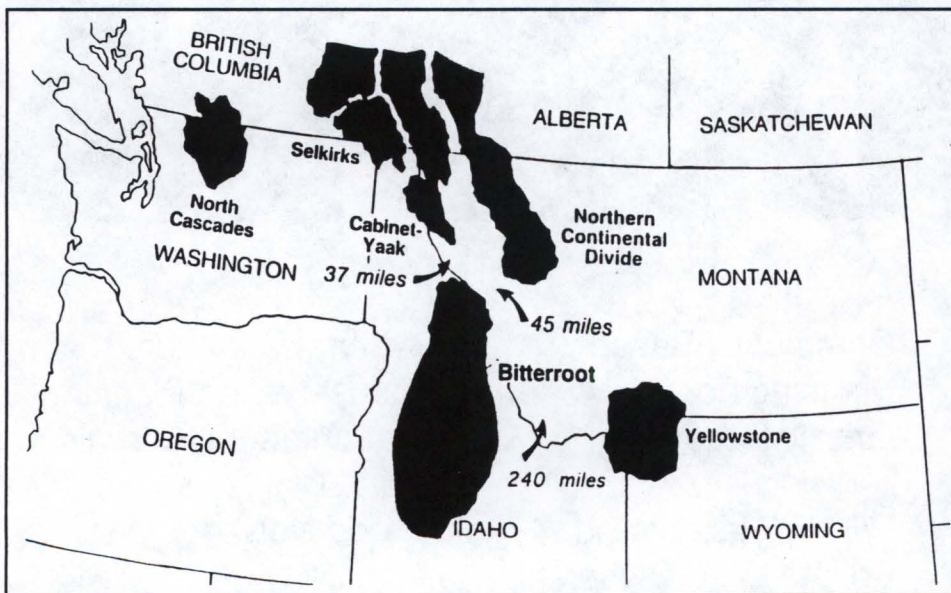
While debate regarding the prospect for long-term persistence and recovery of grizzly populations in the western states continues (Shaffer 1992), quantitative improvements in grizzly conservation have occurred in the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide grizzly bear ecosystems. Decreased grizzly mortality, a wider dis-

tribution of bear sightings and increased reproductive success suggest improvement in the bear's condition. In fact, efforts are underway to evaluate grizzly de-listing in the Yellowstone Ecosystem in the foreseeable future.

Despite this perception of progress in grizzly conservation, scientists and advocates agree that significant expansion of grizzly range and numbers must occur before grizzlies can be considered recovered south of Canada. Current populations are too small and too fragmented to be considered secure.

In recent years, both managing agencies and the non-governmental community have turned their attention toward expanding grizzly range and numbers. With a minimum of six million acres of unoccupied habitat—much of which is designated wilderness—the Bitterroot Ecosystem in central Idaho and western Montana presents the most important grizzly conservation opportunity in the continental United States.<sup>1</sup> This area contains the largest complex of roadless country in the U.S. south of Canada. While the actual boundaries of a recovery or experimental area have not yet been defined, conservative estimates of habitat availability place a recovered Bitterroot population at 200–400 individuals; such a population would increase the total number of grizzlies in the western United States by one-third (Servheen *et al.* 1991).

However, restoration of the grizzly to the Bitterroot is not dependent upon available habitat alone. In fact, it can be argued that the most important single ingredient for a successful recovery program is public acceptance of grizzlies. Whether grizzly bear reintroductions can take place in Idaho during this time of low public confidence in government and high public fear concerning the Endangered Species Act largely depends on how effectively local constitu-



Grizzly bear recovery areas are shown in black. Bitterroot grizzly restoration could increase bear numbers and range south of Canada by one third and begin to link bear populations.

encies are engaged in the grizzly recovery process and on how successfully current human uses of wildlands can be accommodated.

### Historical Setting

Historical records indicate that grizzlies were widespread in the Bitterroot Ecosystem throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century (Wright 1909 and Merriam 1922 in Davis *et al.* 1985). While occasional reports persist, and some scientists suggest that a few grizzlies may remain in the Bitterroot (Jonkel, pers. comm.), no grizzly sightings in the Bitterroot Ecosystem have been confirmed since the 1940s (Davis *et al.* 1985; Weaver, pers. comm.). Aerial and ground searches conducted during the 1980s were negative, and a review of all sighting records from this century classified only 16 of 88 sightings as "probable" (Melquist 1985). Similarly, a remote camera survey produced no evidence of grizzly presence (Kunkel *et al.* 1991).

Reasons for the grizzly's extirpation in the region are conjectural, but evidence points toward a combination of impacts, most notably uncontrolled mortality by humans in response to sheep depredations early in this century, and to a lesser extent, loss of anadromous salmon runs and habitat conversion through a century of fire suppression (Davis *et al.* 1985). Population recovery through natural recolonization is highly unlikely, due to the ecosystem's distance from existing grizzly populations (45 miles to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and 240 miles to the Yellowstone Ecosystem) and its increasing insularization from the other recovery areas by interstate highways and rural development.

### The Bitterroot Recovery Process

The current Bitterroot recovery effort began with the release of the original Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1982), which called for evaluation of the Bitterroot as a recovery area. Evaluations conducted in 1985 (Butterfield and Almack 1985) concluded that the Bitterroot provided "su-

perior" habitat that met seven essential characteristics of suitable grizzly habitat (space, isolation, sanitation, denning, safety, vegetation types and food) as identified by Craighead *et al.* (1982).

Following a several-year series of public hearings and meetings of a Citizen's Advisory Committee, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee approved the Bitterroot Chapter of the Recovery Plan in 1994. In the same year Congress appropriated funds for completion of an environmental impact statement (EIS) on Bitterroot Recovery, and in early 1995 an EIS team leader began to assemble an interdisciplinary team of federal, state, and tribal representatives. Public scoping was conducted in the summer of 1995, a draft EIS is anticipated in March of 1996 and a final EIS will be released in the late summer of 1996; if an alternative involving reintroductions is selected, initial reintroductions would likely begin in the summer of 1997.

### The Political Backdrop

Initiation of the Bitterroot grizzly environmental review process comes on the heels of wolf (*Canis lupus*) reintroductions in Yellowstone National Park and in the Bitterroot area in early 1995, and at a time when endangered species programs are under increased scrutiny by some segments of the public. While the recent wolf reintroductions appear successful, the fact that the Yellowstone releases were the culmination of more than a decade of polarized, acrimonious and expensive debate clearly speaks to a need for more efficient and less confrontational approaches to species recovery.

Federal and state agencies tried to address public concern about meaningful citizen participation by creating a citizen's advisory committee in 1991. Many of the participants in this process, however, found it confrontational, non-productive and an inadequate forum for reaching consensus. Prospects for compromise seemed bleak; in mid-1993 one Idaho newspaper titled its report on public sentiments towards the process "Tell them we don't want no damn grizzlies" (Lewiston Tribune 8/24/93).

With these areas of conflict in mind,

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three organizations representing significantly divergent views on grizzly recovery—Defenders of Wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation and the Resource Organization on Timber Supply (an Idaho-based umbrella organization representing forest industry workers, labor unions and small and large industries)—began meeting informally in 1993 to exchange viewpoints on grizzly recovery issues. The group was soon joined by a fourth organization, the Intermountain Forest Industry Association.

These organizations discovered considerable overlap in their visions of grizzly recovery. Each espoused the basic concept of recovery and eventual delisting of the bear, each recognized the benefits of a streamlined process that minimized polarization and reduced costs, and each sought to minimize social and economic costs to local communities that might be attendant to grizzly recovery. All recognized the importance of engaging local publics in recovery planning. Perhaps most importantly, all organizations believed the wildlands of the Bitterroot Ecosystem could sustain both a substantial grizzly bear population and a healthy local economy.

Setting aside their philosophical differences on other issues, such as wilderness designations, salvage logging programs, and specific aspects of Endangered Species Act reauthorization, these four organizations have cooperatively advanced Bitterroot grizzly restoration in several ways. First, in 1994, they wrote to members of the Idaho and Montana congressional delegations seeking funding to initiate an environmental impact statement on Bitterroot grizzly bear reintroduction. Coming at a time when many wildlife projects were under attack—especially those involving controversial predators—these joint letters played an important role in convincing doubting legislators of the merit of initiating an EIS on Bitterroot grizzly reintroduction.

Second, the coalition took the lead in developing an information booklet on Bitterroot grizzly recovery, which was eventually used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as its primary public information tool during the preliminary stages of the EIS process. The intent was to make sure all citizens were operating



Photograph by C. Bartlebaugh

from a common set of facts.

Third, in early 1995 the coalition hosted a series of public meetings in rural communities, where opinion-makers and other local citizens were invited to present their concerns. These meetings alerted local citizens that a new, collaborative approach was being tried.

Finally, the coalition developed a Bitterroot grizzly bear recovery alternative which it submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for consideration as an alternative in the draft environmental impact statement. This alternative has two key parts. The first is that grizzly reintroduction would occur as an "experimental, non-essential" population under Section 10(j) of the ESA. This parallels the experimental reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone and central Idaho. The second is new and innovative: joint management of the grizzly recovery program by a locally-based team of citizens and agency officials.

Designation of Bitterroot grizzly bears as an "experimental population" would relax some standard ESA provisions. But the guiding principle of experimental populations is that regulations can be relaxed only to the point where recovery of the species is not compromised. The intent of the experimental population designation is to provide agencies with maximum flexibility to meet concerns of

local citizens, while providing for species recovery. Regulations promulgated under the experimental provision can be highly adaptive and site-specific. All actions, however, must maintain the purpose and conviction of the Act and must demonstrably lead toward recovery (Kohm 1991).

Experimental designation is appropriate to the Bitterroot situation, since the area does not have an existing grizzly population, lies within historic grizzly range, and is geographically separate from existing grizzly populations. The experimental designation has been tested with other large carnivores, including red wolves (*C. rufus*) in the Southeast United States and gray wolves in the Yellowstone and central Idaho wolf reintroductions. While this approach clearly did not eliminate all conflict over Yellowstone wolf recovery, attention to reducing economic costs and to minimizing land-use restrictions did result in eventual tolerance, if not acceptance, of wolf recovery by all but the most strident opponents.

But use of the experimental designation alone does not guarantee backing from local residents. The key to gaining support lies in giving local citizens a larger and more meaningful participatory role in bear management. The conservation and scientific communities have faced increasing criticism in recent years for their per-

ceived inattention to the needs of rural communities. One scientist (Brussard 1995) recently asserted the need to "encourage the integration of local communities and conservation efforts everywhere" and bemoaned the seeming reluctance of professionals to do so, "particularly in the American west." He continued: "Clearly, if people see that conservation goals are consistent with their own they will become part of the solution rather than remain a major part of the problem."

With this critical failing of past conservation efforts in mind, the coalition has proposed establishment of a Citizen's Management Committee as the centerpiece of the Bitterroot grizzly experimental population designation. This committee would be comprised of representatives from government and the private sector. The committee would consist of single representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the U.S. Forest Service; Idaho Fish and Game; and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. It would also include seven citizens from the State of Idaho and five citizens from the State of Montana. The citizen representatives would be appointed by the Secretary of the Interior based on recommendations from the governors of Idaho and Montana.

While state and federal agencies would conduct day-to-day bear management activities, the Committee would set policy, develop yearly work plans, and oversee the controversial aspects of grizzly conservation. The Committee would provide informed citizens the opportunity for direct involvement in grizzly management decisions. They would be responsible for developing plans that restore grizzlies yet minimize impacts on local economies.

Our vision of a citizen-based management committee takes a large step into uncharted legal and political waters. Endangered species management in the United States has been based largely on a "top-down" model of federal regulation and enforcement. Our "bottom-up" model is community-based, and relies upon federal control only as a safeguard in the event that local committee actions are determined to be contrary to the stated goals of the ESA.

Critics of this approach—including other conservationists—have raised the specter of malfeasance by a management committee weighted towards local citizens and natural resource industry representatives. While we appreciate this concern—certainly this approach must be considered experimental in nature—we believe that local citizens recommended by their Governor and appointed by the Secretary of Interior to a highly visible committee will not attempt to sabotage its efforts. In fact, if citizens are given this responsibility, we believe grizzly bear conservation will become less polarized, less time-consuming, and more oriented toward problem-solving. If this happens, joint citizen/agency management of endangered species could become an important conservation advance.

### Summary

Collaborative approaches have moved the discussion about Bitterroot grizzly reintroductions from *whether* they should occur to *how* they should occur. The ongoing Bitterroot grizzly recovery process offers several lessons relevant to future endangered species recovery efforts. First, partnerships between conservationists and traditional opponents can be powerful political tools for initiation of recovery efforts. Second, local publics will tolerate recovery program implementation more readily if local citizens participate in management. And finally, by reducing polarization, collaborative recovery processes save monies better spent on recovery actions than on confrontation and litigation. If the initial steps in the process are indicative of future success, Bitterroot grizzly recovery may illustrate a needed model for cooperative endangered species recovery programs.

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While likely retaining a remnant grizzly population, recovery, through augmentation or other means, in the North Cascades Recovery Zone in Washington will also be a key component of recovery in the lower 48 states.

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