

Grizzly Bear Recovery in the Bitterroot Ecosystem
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Selected Alternative
March 9, 2000

Were grizzly bears ever common in the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

Historically, the grizzly bear was a widespread inhabitant of the Bitterroot Mountains in central Idaho and western Montana. When Lewis and Clark traveled through the Bitterroot country in 1806, grizzly bears were abundant. They killed at least 7 grizzly bears including 1 female and 2 cubs while camped near present-day Kamiah, Idaho. Grizzly bears were common in central Idaho until the early 1900's. William Wright, a hunter and naturalist, wrote of killing dozens of grizzly bears over several years at the turn of the century in the Bitterroot Mountains. Conservative estimates indicate trappers and hunters killed 25 to 40 grizzly bears annually in the Bitterroot Mountains during the early 1900's. A major influx of hunters, trappers, and settlers at the turn of the century, and later sheepherders were responsible for direct mortality and elimination of grizzly bears from the Bitterroot Ecosystem.

Do grizzly bears reside in the Bitterroot Ecosystem today?

The last verified death of a grizzly bear in the Bitterroot Ecosystem occurred in 1932 and the last tracks were observed in 1946. Although occasional unverified reports of grizzly sightings persist in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, no verified tracks or sightings have been documented in more than 50 years. Based on the best scientific evidence available, and the lack of verified evidence for more than 50 years, there appear to be no grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem at this time.

How does the Bitterroot Ecosystem fit into overall grizzly bear recovery efforts?

Bear biologists have estimated that the habitat in the Bitterroot Ecosystem could eventually support more than 300 grizzly bears. This would increase the current minimum number of grizzlies in the contiguous United States by 25-30%. Establishment of a third major population in the remote Bitterroot Ecosystem (the other two being in the Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems) would contribute significantly to long-term conservation and recovery of the grizzly bear.

Does the Bitterroot Ecosystem provide enough suitable habitat to support a recovered grizzly bear population?

The Bitterroot Ecosystem is one of the largest contiguous blocks of federal land remaining in the lower 48 United States. The core of the ecosystem contains three wilderness areas which make up the largest block of wilderness habitat in the Rocky Mountains south of Canada. Of all remaining unoccupied grizzly bear habitat in the lower 48 States, this area in the Bitterroot Mountains has the best potential for grizzly bear recovery, primarily due to the large wilderness area. As such, the Bitterroot Ecosystem offers excellent potential to recover a healthy population of grizzly bears and to boost the long-term survival and recovery prospects for this species in the contiguous United States.

Does the habitat in the Bitterroot Ecosystem provide adequate food resources for grizzly recovery?

Habitat quality has been studied extensively. At least 6 different studies have been conducted within the Bitterroot Ecosystem that have direct applicability to the potential for grizzly bear recovery. Habitat quality varies throughout the experimental population area, and likewise throughout the recovery area. However, studies indicate that a great variety of preferred grizzly bear foods are present in the ecosystem. A wide variety of all season foods are present including good quantities of several key berry species, forbs and grasses, as well as historically high levels of ungulates to provide carrion during the fall and spring months. Food habits of black bears are quite similar to those of grizzly bears. Healthy populations of black bears live within the Bitterroot Ecosystem, and annual hunter harvest totals about 1,000. A recovered population of 280 grizzly bears should be able to find sufficient high quality forage within and adjacent to the recovery area. Although bear densities may not recover to their historical levels during the peak of the salmon and whitebark pine era, the population should achieve densities similar to those found in other interior ecosystems where those food sources are not present. The key to recovery in the Bitterroot Ecosystem would likely be effective management including limitation of human-caused mortality rather than quantity or quality of habitat.

At one time grizzly bears were present in high densities throughout the Bitterroot Ecosystem. Salmon and whitebark pine, two important grizzly bear foods, were common during the peak of grizzly bear populations.

Salmon have been virtually eliminated along the Clearwater drainage due to dams that have blocked their migration. Whitebark pine has been reduced to about 20%-40% of its historical abundance in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, and now is most prevalent in the southern half of the ecosystem. Whitebark pine populations will probably be reduced to 5-10% of their historic numbers, unless management actions to restore this ecosystem component are successful. Grizzly bears relocated to the Bitterroot Ecosystem would likely come from areas where neither salmon nor whitebark pine are plentiful.

Where would grizzly bears be obtained?

Subadult grizzly bears of both sexes would be trapped, each year for 5 years, from areas in Canada (in cooperation with Canadian authorities) and the United States that presently have populations of grizzly bears living in habitats that are similar to those found in the Bitterroot Ecosystem. Three sources of grizzly bears for the Bitterroot Ecosystem have been identified: southeast British Columbia, the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem population in northwest Montana, and the Yellowstone Ecosystem population. The specific number of bears that could be obtained yearly from potential source populations is unknown at this time. Some undetermined level of mortality is expected among transplanted bears. Every effort would be taken to minimize this, but mortalities are expected to occur. Any transplanted bears that died or were removed as a result of human action could be replaced. Such replacements would be in addition to the original minimum of 25 bears.

Where would grizzly bears be reintroduced?

The Bitterroot Grizzly Bear Recovery Area would be designated under the preferred alternative to consist of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. This area is approximately 5,785 square miles. This is the area where recovery would be emphasized. Bears would only be released in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, unless it was determined that reintroduction in the River of No Return Wilderness is appropriate. Specific relocation sites that have high quality bear habitat and low likelihood of human encounters would be identified and recommended by the management agencies.

Who would manage the grizzly bears reintroduced into the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

Under the preferred alternative a 15 member Citizen Management Committee (CMC) would be appointed by the Secretary of Interior in consultation with the governors of Idaho and Montana, and the Nez Perce Tribe. This committee would implement the Bitterroot Chapter of the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.

The preferred alternative would authorize the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and the USDA Forest Service, in consultation with the USFWS and the Nez Perce Tribe, to exercise day-to-day management responsibility within the experimental population area while implementing the Bitterroot Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan Chapter, and the special rules, policies and plans of the CMC.

How and when will bears be reintroduced?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service vision for implementation of the preferred alternative includes a "phase-in period during the first year of implementation to establish the CMC, introduce sanitation standards, install sanitation equipment, and perform public outreach information and education activities." Under the preferred alternative, this first year of implementation would be a joint effort of the CMC and management agencies and would serve to lessen social impacts and potential conflicts from reintroduction of grizzly bears to the Bitterroot Ecosystem. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to designate this reintroduced population of grizzly bears as "nonessential experimental."

What is a nonessential experimental population?

In 1982, Congress amended the Endangered Species Act to permit greater management flexibility for species that are reintroduced to their historic range. The purpose of the added flexibility was to garner more local support for restoration efforts. Such populations may be designated as "experimental" and managed within a delineated area according to special rules designed to balance needs of both people and listed species. Citizens can be involved in crafting such management rules.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to designate this reintroduced population of grizzly bears as "nonessential experimental". Such designation would allow these grizzly bears to be treated as a species "proposed for listing" rather than "threatened" for the purpose of section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The biological status of the grizzly and the need for management flexibility resulted in the Service proposing to designate the grizzly bears reintroduced into east-central Idaho as "nonessential." Because reintroduced grizzly bears would be classified as a nonessential experimental population, the Service's management practices can reduce local concerns

about excessive government regulation on private lands, uncontrolled livestock depredations, excessive big game predation, and the lack of State government and local citizen involvement in the program.

Where will grizzly bears be managed under the preferred alternative?

The Bitterroot Grizzly Bear Experimental Population Area (experimental population area), which includes most of east-central Idaho and part of western Montana, would be established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under authority of section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act. This approximately 25,140 square mile area would include the area bounded by U.S. Highway 93 from Missoula, Montana, to Challis, Idaho; Idaho Highway 75 from Challis to Stanley, Idaho; Idaho Highway 21 from Stanley to Lowman, Idaho; Idaho Highway 17 from Lowman to Banks, Idaho; Idaho Highway 55 from Banks to New Meadows, Idaho; U.S. Highway 95 from New Meadows to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; and Interstate 90 from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, to Missoula, Montana. Much of the experimental population area has high-quality bear habitat with low likelihood of conflicts between grizzly bears and humans.

Grizzly bears moving outside the recovery area into the surrounding experimental population area would be accommodated through management provisions in the preferred alternative. All grizzly bears found in the wild within the boundaries of the experimental population area after the first releases would be considered nonessential experimental animals and would be counted as part of the recovery goal. Grizzly bears outside the experimental population area would be considered as threatened unless they are marked or otherwise known to be experimental animals.

How long would it take to recover grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

The tentative recovery goal of this alternative is approximately 280 grizzly bears. Under the preferred alternative, a revised recovery goal would be recommended based on scientific advice, once sufficient information is available. Population projections indicate that bear populations would require at least 110 years at a 2 percent growth rate or a minimum of 50 years at a 4 percent growth rate to reach the tentative recovery level of approximately 280 bears. Realistically, grizzly bear recovery in the Bitterroot Ecosystem could take a minimum of 50 years, and given potential conflicts, could likely take more than 110 years.

What would be the risk to human safety from reintroduced bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would take all possible actions to reduce the risk of human/bear conflicts. Only grizzly bears with no history of conflicts with people would be considered candidates for reintroduction. Suitable bears would be released at remote wilderness sites within the Bitterroot Ecosystem to reduce the likelihood of encounters with humans. All released bears would be fitted with radio collars and their movements would be monitored to keep the public informed of general bear locations and recovery efforts. And a proactive information and education program and sanitation improvements would be initiated during the first year of implementation and would continue through the implementation phase.

Injury rates would probably be similar to those that currently exist in areas outside of national parks where grizzly bears exist. In northwest Montana and north Idaho (outside of Glacier Park), only two bear inflicted injuries have occurred in the last 50 years. A hunter shot and injured a grizzly bear that responded by mortally injuring the hunter in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in 1956. And a bird hunter in the Mission Valley shot and wounded a grizzly that responded by injuring the hunter in 1985. In the Yellowstone Ecosystem outside of the Park, there have been 17 injuries (including 3 mortalities) within the last 156 years.

In the Bitterroot Ecosystem, bears would be placed in remote areas and would be far removed from any national parks and associated habituation problems. During the first several decades following reintroduction, chance of injury caused by grizzly bears would be exceedingly small due to the low density of bears in the area. Under the preferred alternative, populations are estimated to achieve recovery levels of approximately 280 bears in a minimum of 50 years, and likely more than 110 years. Using human injury rates from areas with similar circumstances (the Northern Continental Divide and Yellowstone Ecosystems), and recognizing a net increase in human visitation, projections for human injury once bears are recovered 50-110+ years in the future, are less than one injury per year and less than one grizzly bear-induced human mortality every few decades.

Does the preferred alternative allow people to kill grizzly bears in defense of property?

Within the experimental population area, the preferred alternative would continue to allow a person to kill a grizzly bear in self-defense or defense of others, provided that such taking is reported within 24 hours to appropriate authorities. Following issuance of a permit by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the public would be allowed to