

Grizzly Restoration in the North Cascades Ecosystem and the Public Imagination

Prior to the environmental devastation of the North American fur trade and European settler expansion, the Grizzly Bear roamed much of the Western portions of North America from Alaska to Central Mexico. Nearly exterminated, the grizzly was reduced from a population of 50,000 individuals to a mere 500 in little over a century before being rescued by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1975 and the restoration efforts that followed. Now, there are at least 1,923 grizzlies roaming the lower 48 states (“Ursus Arctos Horribilis” Overview). Although grizzly populations are healthier now, the species is still threatened and populations remain functionally absent in two of the six recovery zones designated by the ESA, including the North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE) which spans Northern Washington and Southern British Columbia (National Park Service et al. Pg. 29). Restoration plans for the NCE are currently under development and, if finalized, grizzly restoration could begin in the near future. While the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Parks Service examine public commentary and finalize decisions, it is an appropriate time to evaluate management plans and their likelihood of success throughout the NCE, including the issues that might obstruct grizzly reintroduction. Overall, environmental conditions in the NCE and the preferred reintroduction plan of the NPS and FWS make initial reintroduction likely to succeed. In the long term, the greatest threat to grizzlies in the NCE will be negative public opinion and the neglect of important management tools like educational outreach and support for the people who will be most likely to encounter these animals in their communities and the wild.

There are three management plans being considered by environmental agencies. Alternative A is the “no action” plan. In this option, managers would focus their efforts on already-existing land management practices to reduce conflict with wildlife and would neither reintroduce grizzlies to the ecosystem nor stop them from repopulating the area. If they enter the

NCE, they would be managed under ESA rules. Under option B, grizzlies would be captured from healthy populations and reintroduced to the NCE where they would be managed under the ESA. Alternative C would reintroduce grizzlies to the NCE but designate them as a 10j experimental population instead of a threatened population regulated by ESA rules. This would allow land managers and community members greater flexibility in dealing with bears that come into conflict with humans. All management plans incorporate new and existing education, sanitation, habitat management, and monitoring programs. Due to a variety of factors, it is unlikely that grizzlies will ever successfully migrate from existing populations to the NCE and establish a viable population (NPS et al. Pg. V.). As such, the NPS and FWS favor the capture and reintroduction of grizzlies. They prefer Alternative C because the increased flexibility in bear management options promises better cooperation between communities and environmentalists regarding management and conflict reduction (47 - 50).

Although the exact benefits of large carnivore reintroduction remain in debate (Alston 86-88), Grizzlies are known to improve ecosystem biodiversity by dispersing seeds, aerating the soil while digging for food, and keeping prey populations in check via predation (NPS et al. 84). Grizzlies are significant to human communities as well as ecological ones, including some first nations communities in the Pacific Northwest such as the Upper Skagit Tribe, who have shown their support for restoration through public comment (Flatt). Grizzlies are also symbolically and socially important; they embody the concept of wilderness, enhance the feeling of wild spaces, and provide psychosocial benefits through the act of stewardship itself. Beyond their benefit to humans, grizzlies are intrinsically valuable as a living species. Because grizzlies were extirpated from the ecosystem via European settler activities, we as the inheritors of that society, have a moral obligation to restore the damage that was done by it (Lee 84 - 88).

Not only is the NCE one of the six recovery zones designated in the 1975 grizzly bear recovery plan, but the recent analysis from the Environmental Impact Assessment conducted by the NPS and FWS show that the NCE is an excellent habitat for grizzlies with the capacity to support a population of 250 – 300 bears after gradual introduction. The North Cascades Ecosystem Recovery Zone is also 80% wilderness, allowing grizzlies significant territory to roam undisturbed. Land management plans have prepared the area for bears through improved sanitation, poaching control, motor vehicle access management, ongoing research and monitoring, and educational outreach. Additionally, according to one report, conditions will remain favorable to grizzlies even as climate change alters the ecosystem (Ransom). Not all areas of historic grizzly habitat are suitable for reintroduction, but the NCE is different; it represents an ideal location to expand grizzly populations in North America and bolster a species which remains threatened (NPS et al.).

The backbone of opposition to grizzly reintroduction is fear of violent conflict. Other common concerns include livestock predation, loss of recreation access, damage to crops, harm to other species, and doubt in the competency of government wildlife agencies (Hughes). Though overall rates of conflict are low and grizzlies are more likely than humans to be killed in an altercation, these concerns about the impacts of reintroduction are not unfounded, and a small group of rural communities and recreationists will be affected. Resource managers will need to help rural communities and recreationists avoid conflict by providing education programs that encourage human behavioral changes. Sensibly, this need is partially accounted for in the preferred management plan of the NPS, Alternative C, by designating the NCE grizzlies as an experimental population, thus loosening the restrictions of the Endangered Species Act in order to give communities more flexibility and agency in the handling of bears (NPS et. al).

The greatest challenge to successful reintroduction will be the management of the grizzly's image in the media and the public imagination. A 2016 poll conducted by Tulchin Research found that support for this project was high throughout Washington, across the political spectrum, and even in rural communities likely to be affected by conflict. However, many common fears about grizzlies still loom large in public commentary, politics, and the media. While grizzlies inspire plenty of supporters, they are still vulnerable to human fear, often stemming from problematic media representations that center around conflict with humans, property damage, and threats to recreation access. Generally, media coverage of bears focuses on violent interactions and relies on polarizing, simplistic narratives that lose sight of the nuanced challenges and benefits of coexisting with these animals. As a result, these narratives tend to push people away from management strategies that rely on human behavioral changes as solutions. This is exemplified in the Trump Administration's 2020 decision to halt reintroduction efforts due to a minority of public commentary expressing opposition to reintroduction and fear of bears. Going forward, it would benefit the restoration efforts in the NCE to tell stories about grizzlies that decentralize conflict and educate the public on what these animals are like, how to appreciate their presence, and how to stay safe alongside them (Hughes).

The value of long-term engagement with rural communities is further highlighted by the success of the Carnivores and Communities Program (CACP) of Southwestern Alberta. After an increase in grizzly sightings in the early 2000s, along with rising community concerns, the CACP was formed to support coexistence with carnivores, especially grizzlies, through attractant management projects, deadstock removal, and educational programs on bear safety and bear behavior. After 9 years of work, the CACP evaluated the rate of conflict in their focus area from 2009 – 2018 using a combination of public complaint records and social surveys. During this time, there were notable decreases in incidents related to attractants and deadstock. The safety

workshops were well received by the public and survey results indicated that bear safety courses led to real behavioral changes (Morehouse).

Overall, the grizzly reintroduction effort has a solid foundation for success. The land encompassed by the reintroduction zone has been well prepared by land managers, and even considering the looming threat of climate change, the NCE should be a prime habitat for grizzlies long into the future. Additionally, public support for reintroduction is high across the political spectrum, even in the communities most likely to be affected by the reintroduction of bears. When the final plans are drawn, and the first grizzlies amble out into the wild North Cascades Ecosystem, it is highly likely that they will enjoy a long future as our neighbors. However, it will be essential for land managers to provide educational programs on bears and bear safety, in addition to support with attractant management, to prevent conflict and encourage coexistence. Grizzlies are, above all, an extraordinary species with many ecological and ethnographic benefits, a species that we once nearly destroyed and which we now have a moral obligation to restore and protect. Grizzly reintroduction remains the right decision for the NCE, and the stage is set for a successful return, but their presence in the North Cascades will forever be imperiled by changes in the public imagination. Going forward, environmentalists should be prepared to manage the public image of the grizzly much as they are prepared to manage the bears themselves.

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