

Selway Bitterroot Reintroduction: Bears on Ice

Idaho and a little slice of Montana are blessed to have the largest expanse of contiguous wildlands in the lower-48 states. Centered on the Frank Church River of No Return and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the area includes 26,000 square miles of some of the last best wildlife habitat in the United States Northern Rockies - even more than the Greater Yellowstone. Still, this vast area is missing one species that puts the "wild" back in wilderness - the grizzly bear. Bears were functionally eliminated from the area in the early part of the century, killed primarily by settlers and miners, as bears congregated at streams rich in wild salmon.

In response to a decision in 2000 by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to release five grizzlies in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness every year for five years beginning in 2002, Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne committed to stop the plan. Governor Kempthorne pledged a state litigation war chest of over 1 million dollars to prevent grizzly bear reintroduction saying, "I oppose bringing these massive flesh-eating carnivores into Idaho."

Secretary of Interior Gale Norton subsequently reopened the comment process in 2001, to make doubly sure that local Idaho interests had been considered. In response, 98% of the public comments submitted supported grizzly reintroduction, similar to levels of support expressed in the previous Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. Nonetheless, the administration has refused to proceed with reintroduction, with Secretary Norton insisting that her priority is to recover bears where they are, rather than reintroduce bears.

The FWS Selway-Bitterroot grizzly proposal had attracted significant controversy from various viewpoints. Conservationists, including the Sierra Club, were concerned that proposed protections were inadequate to maintain an animal so easy to kill and so sensitive to habitat loss. They expressed concern about the proposed size of the recovery zone, and the fact that reintroduced bears would not be afforded full protections under the Endangered Species Act, which



Photo Courtesy of Jeff & Alexa Henry, Roche Jaune Pictures, Inc.

have been essential to maintaining grizzlies elsewhere in the lower-48 states. Also, conservationists were concerned that the plan for management by a 15-member committee of citizens nominated by the governors of Idaho, and Montana, would be dominated by local pro-industry, anti-bear interests. This committee would have played a vital role, deciding how many bears were needed to restore a healthy population, and when or whether to remove problem or nuisance bears.

Still, despite these differences, conservationists have been united in their recognition that long-

term bear recovery necessitates restoration of the grizzly in central Idaho, which would provide a critical connection for grizzlies between Yellowstone and Canada.

Current status of bears and habitat

Although grizzlies were largely eliminated by the early part of the century in the Selway-Bitterroot, occasionally bears stray into the ecosystem from areas further north near Glacier. Some bears may still den there as well. Agencies have not conducted a thorough survey of current grizzly presence in the Selway-Bitterroot.

"It is my fear that if we allow...the last of the grizzly bears to be taken away from us, then the very idea of freedom will die with it."

Edward Abbey

Scientists, including Drs. John Craighead, Dave Mattson, Troy Merrill, Howard Quigley and others have demonstrated that adequate habitat remains for grizzlies, even with the almost complete loss of salmon and the greatly reduced sources of whitebark pine nuts (as a result of the blister rust epidemic). These analyses also show that some of the best habitat lies outside the designated Wilderness, such as the berry rich lands north of the Lochsa River.

Failure to Recover bears in the Bitterroot: hurting Yellowstone grizzly prospects?

Recent statements by grizzly coordinator Chris Servheen in the press indicate concern about the detrimental effects on Yellowstone grizzlies from failure to restore grizzlies in the Selway Bitterroot. Specifically, Servheen stated that the decision to shelve reintroduction plans would eliminate an essential "stepping stone" that could have linked Yellowstone grizzlies, which suffer from genetic isolation, to other bear populations in the U.S. Still, FWS continues to pursue Yellowstone delisting, without plans to restore the grizzly to the Bitterroot.

The Search Goes on

The Sierra Club and others continue to press for reintroducing bears to the Bitterroot, given the overwhelming public support for this endeavor, and the biological importance to long-term grizzly recovery in the lower 48 states.

In the meantime, conservationists continue to search for evidence of existing grizzly bears in the Selway-Bitterroot. The grizzly killed in Nine Mile drainage in 2001, for example, spent some time in the Selway-Bitterroot recovery area - and others may be doing the same. Research continues, by Friends of the Bitterroot, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Doug Peacock and others, with the Sierra Club Grizzly Bear Project's encouragement and support. If a grizzly is verified, the Fish and Wildlife Service would have to afford it legal habitat protections under the ESA.

In addition, the Sierra Club continues to press for efforts to improve the handling of garbage in the area, recognizing that human attractants will create conflicts, which will kill bears and limit the ability of the grizzly to flourish in the Selway Bitterroot.



Photo Courtesy of USFWS

Secretary of Interior Gale Norton proposed a 'No Action Alternative' on June 21, 2001, designed to prevent grizzly reintroduction in Idaho. Public comments were received until August 21, 2001.

- ◆ 28,222 comments were received, nearly 4000 more than on the original proposal and EIS.
- ◆ 27,627 (98%) disagreed with Norton's decision to block grizzly recovery in the Selway Bitterroot.
- ◆ 24,875 comments came in form letters, with 100% disagreeing with Norton; of 3347 original letters, 82% disagreed and 11% agreed with Norton's decision.
- ◆ Of the 3130 Idaho comments received 98% disagreed with Norton; of the 2964 Montana comments received, 93% disagreed with Norton's decision.
- ◆ Norton's reply was that grizzly reintroduction "was never a public opinion contest" and the department's final decision would be based on "the policy, the science, and the needs and desires of local elected officials and citizens who would be most affected."

Since that time, the recovery process has not moved forward, and the interagency subcommittee is close to being disbanded.

The Sierra Club's Campaign to Guard the Grizzly is aimed at protecting the threatened species and its habitat in the lower 48 United States and Canada. The Sierra Club, which was founded more than a century ago by John Muir, is America's oldest, largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization.