
Promoting Knowledge of Grizzly Bears among Recovery Zone Residents in Washington's North Cascades

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Extended Abstract: Over the last two hundred years, the number of grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) in the coterminous United States has declined from an estimated 50,000–100,000 individuals to around 1100. The grizzly bear was listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1975, and six recovery ecosystems have been established since that time. The North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE) is the largest grizzly bear recovery ecosystem encompassing approximately 24,800 km² in north central Washington. The ecosystem extends for an additional 10,350 km² in south central British Columbia, Canada (Gaines et al. 2000).

The current population estimate for the Washington NCE is < 20 individuals (Gaines et al. 2001). Observations of grizzly bears and verified grizzly bear sign are very rare. Local residents have not coexisted with a significant grizzly bear population for many decades; therefore, public knowledge of grizzly bears is limited.

Despite general support for grizzly bear recovery in Washington (Duda et al. 1996), segments of the human population in or near the NCE oppose recovery. In order for residents to make well informed comments that reflect their opinions on grizzly bear recovery, perceptions and attitudes towards bears must be based upon accurate information. Agencies responsible for recovery in the NCE are keen to identify more effective public outreach strategies to overcome widespread misconceptions about grizzlies.

The Grizzly Bear Outreach Project (GBOP) began in April 2002 as an extension of past recovery-based education activities in the NCE. The GBOP provides factual information about grizzly bear ecology and behavior, sanitation and safety in bear country, and policies associated with the recovery process to people living, recreating, and working in the NCE. It provides a nonadvocacy setting for the involvement of all stakeholder groups.

¹NatureServe Explorer (version 4.0, July 2004) lists *Ursus arctos* as the brown bear, and *Ursus arctos horribilis* as the grizzly bear.

The approach of the Grizzly Bear Outreach Project includes

- community perceptions analyses to assess the knowledge and attitudes of community members prior to implementing education components. Analyses include qualitative interviews with representatives of various stakeholder groups (ranchers, timber industry workers, realtors, media, outfitters, guides, wildlife agency staff, recreationists, orchard owners, owners of recreation businesses, health professionals, teachers, school administrators, and community organization leaders), and quantitative baseline and follow-up telephone surveys with randomly selected NCE residents;
- one-on-one meetings between project staff and community members to gauge concerns and share project information;
- small focus group meetings to discuss grizzly bear issues with 4–6 people at a time in informal settings;
- a coalition of community members to provide a local information source and extend the reach of project staff;
- a project brochure containing information about grizzly bear ecology, and sanitation and safety tips for the home, ranch, campsite, and community, and for activities such as hiking, horse packing, hunting, and fishing;
- a modular slide show that parallels the content of the brochure; and
- a project web site (www.bearinfo.org) to facilitate distribution of project announcements and updates, to provide links to other relevant sites, and to solicit anonymous comments from the public.

The Grizzly Bear Outreach Project was initiated in Okanogan County (northeastern NCE) by two small nongovernment organizations. Funding was provided by two nongovernment conservation organizations and five government agencies. The two GBOP directors (each at ¼ of full time, salaried) hired a local field coordinator (at ¾ of full time) to target nine Okanogan County communities in and adjacent to the recovery area. The project expanded to include Whatcom and Skagit Counties (northwestern NCE) in September 2003. This expansion required a second salaried field coordinator (at ½ of full time) and a focus on 10 additional communities.

One hundred and thirty qualitative community assessment interviews were conducted in Okanogan and Skagit Counties. Most interview participants expressed an interest in having greater access to accurate information. In October 2003, a telephone survey of 508 randomly selected rural Whatcom and Skagit County residents (living in or adjacent to the recovery area) was conducted as part of a comprehensive baseline and follow-up evaluation process. The survey consisted of 50 questions concerning knowledge of and attitudes towards grizzly bears. Results revealed that

- 69% of residents surveyed had heard little or nothing about grizzly bear recovery in the NCE;
- 65% knew that grizzly bears were ‘rare’ in the NCE;

- very few respondents (only 3%) realized that the diet of grizzly bears in the North Cascades is only about 10% or less meat and fish;
- 31% believed (incorrectly) that it is legal to kill a grizzly bear in defence of livestock;
- 73% reported that they obtain most information about grizzly bears from newspapers, magazines, TV, or films;
- 36% agreed that ‘grizzly bears are very dangerous to humans’ (56% disagreed);
- 76% supported grizzly bear recovery (52% expressed strong support, 24% moderately supported recovery), while 16% opposed recovery (11% were moderately opposed, 5% were strongly opposed);
- 33% would be more supportive of recovery if the population was augmented with 5–10 bears; and
- 72% agreed that local citizens will be willing to work with wildlife management agencies to determine the best recovery steps.

Initial assessment of demographic data revealed stronger support for recovery among female and young respondents and wilderness recreationists.

More than 200 one-on-one meetings have been conducted with stakeholders in the three counties. These meetings have confirmed general support for recovery but limited knowledge of ecology and recovery processes. A coalition of five members was initially established in the northeastern NCE. Coalition members are currently being recruited in the northwestern NCE. Approximately 40 slide presentations have been delivered at agency workshops and to audiences including the Washington Outfitters and Guides Association, community associations (e.g., Elks, Kiwanis), community colleges, outdoor recreation groups, conservancy organizations, and schools. Fifty thousand tri-fold brochures were printed in October 2002. Approximately 30,000 have been distributed to local communities, schools and youth organizations, churches, tourism business owners, stores, community visitor centers, wildlife agency visitor centers, and ranger stations. Brochures have also been distributed at group presentations and community events. The project web site has served approximately 6000 visitors since late September 2002. Personal meetings with members of local media outlets have resulted in approximately 30 newspaper articles. Northeastern NCE project activities halted in February 2003 but will be reinstated in March 2004.

Many wildlife research, conservation, and management projects lack mechanisms to promote meaningful engagement with the public. Our initial work suggests that the public seeks such engagement. Participant comments also suggest that early communication can help alleviate concerns regarding recovery activities. This may be especially true when dealing with listed species and the complex biological, social, and political issues that can emerge.

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