The Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem: Montana's "Other" Grizzly Bear Population

When you think about grizzly bears in Montana, perhaps the scene of bears grazing in Yellowstone National Park's Lamar Valley comes to mind. Perhaps you are aware of the recent discussions and efforts to delist that population. Or, maybe you picture the bears around Glacier National Park digging up glacier lilies instead.

If you ask people about grizzly bears in Montana, these two populations garner most of the attention and discussion. After all, most of the grizzly bears in Montana are found in these two populations. Yet Montana has another population that is often left out of the grizzly bear conversation. The story of this population isn't as well known, but it plays a significant role in the history -- and future -- of grizzly bears in Montana and the lower 48 states.

Few people know that nearly 30 years ago, Montana almost lost grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) in the Cabinet Mountains of northwest Montana. Few people are also aware of the current efforts to recover the grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem (CYE), or, as it's sometimes known, the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone (Figure 1).

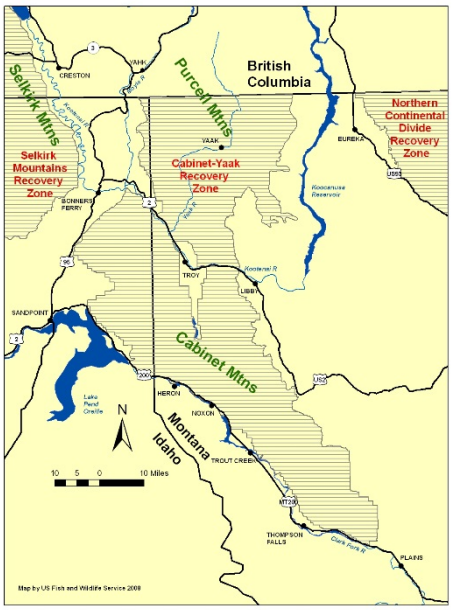

Figure 1. The Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem in NW Montana

The grizzly bear's historic range covered much of North America from the plains westward to California and from central Mexico north through Canada and Alaska. Today, the grizzly is found in only about 2% of its original range in the lower 48 states (Figure 2).

Grizzly bears in the lower 48 states are currently listed as a Threatened species under the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA). Six ecosystems were identified as areas where grizzly bears populations could be recovered, one of which is the CYE.

The CYE lies in far northwestern Montana and northeast Idaho. The Kootenai River bisects the CYE, with grizzly bear habitat found south in the Cabinet Mountains and to the north within the Yaak River

drainage. Unlike the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), which have Glacier and Yellowstone national parks at their core, the CYE has highways, rivers, railroads, towns, and communities scattered throughout the recovery zone. While the Bitterroot Ecosystem (BE) also lies within Montana, it is not currently home to a population of grizzly bears (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Historic and current range of the grizzly bear in North America

Figure 3. The 6 designated recovery areas for grizzly bears in the lower 48 states

In 1998 the grizzly bear population in the Cabinet Mountain portion of the CYE was estimated at fewer than 15 bears. However, recent data suggest that the population may have been fewer than 10 individuals. In an effort to boost both the genetic diversity and population size of grizzly bears in the Cabinet Mountains, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in cooperation with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), began a population augmentation program from 1990- 1994. Four backcountry female grizzly bears, with no history of conflicts with people, were moved to the Cabinet Mountains from the NCDE population. The goal was for augmented bears to remain in the Cabinet

Mountains and reproduce. The female grizzly bear, identified as #286, relocated in 1993 and remained in the Cabinet Mountains and successfully produced 3 generations of offspring before her death in 2009.

The augmentation program continued in 2007 with FWP trapping and selecting the backcountry grizzly bears from the NCDE population. Since 2007, up to 2 backcountry grizzly bears per year have been relocated to the Cabinet Mountains from the NCDE as part of this program (Figure 4).

In all, a total of 19 grizzly bears have been augmented to the Cabinet Mountains since 1990. The result has been a significant increase in genetic diversity and population size in the Cabinet Mountain grizzly bear population, which is now estimated at approximately 25-30 bears. Overall, there an estimated 50-55 grizzly bears throughout the entire CYE.

Figure 1. Augmentation grizzly bear 635, a young female, being released in the Cabinet Mountains in 2008. Photo courtesy of FWP and USFWS.

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The biggest threats to grizzly bear population recovery in the CYE are mortalities related to habituation (where a bear stops being cautious around people), or because of human-food conditioning (when a bear actively seeks only human-related foods instead of natural foods). These risks are especially high near residential and developed areas.

FWP grizzly bear management specialists foster public awareness, tolerance, and support of grizzly bear management by directly helping residents prevent human-bear interactions. The primary goal of the FWP conflict management program in the CYE is to help residents prevent conflicts with bears, and to provide effective permanent solutions to conflicts as they happen. Securing human-related foods around homes is the key towards preventing human-bear conflicts, and will ultimately prevent the deaths of grizzly bears due to human-food conditioning or habituation.

We hope that by working with residents on living with grizzly bears, that the CYE grizzly bear population will continue to grow, meet population recovery criteria and ultimately be delisted from the ESA.

The future looks bright for grizzly bears in the CYE. There is still a ways to go, but maybe when people think about grizzly bears in Montana, they will think of a grizzly bear feeding on roots and berries in the

Cabinet Mountains of NW Montana, and all the hard work scientists, managers and area residents have put forth to recover the population (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A grizzly bear near the Yaak River in Northwestern Montana. Photo courtesy of Nancy Oar.