

A Guiding Light

Recent recommendations from the Governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council are helping wildlife managers better understand exactly how Montanans want bears and people to coexist.

By Jessianne Castle



GOOD BEAR, BAD BEAR, OR JUST A BEAR? Public attitudes toward grizzlies vary widely. Some people revere them as symbols of wilderness. Others see them as adorable family groups. Still others view the large carnivores, like the bear at right captured after killing sheep, as threats to their livelihood. A new citizens advisory council worked for a year to find common ground on which FWP will build a statewide management and conservation plan.

LEFT TO RIGHT: BRUCE BECKER; PERRY BACKUS/RAVALLI REPUBLIC

On a Saturday morning in October 2018, Jamie Jonkel was staring at a problem. The large, blocky head and narrow eyes of a grizzly bear looked squarely back at him from inside a culvert trap. Using a piece of road-killed deer, the local game warden had easily captured the hungry bear. Jonkel faced a much more difficult challenge: figuring out where to release it.

Hired by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 1996, the veteran bear management specialist had released dozens of grizzlies. But this one was different. The 250-pound male was caught on the Whitetail Golf Course north of Stevensville, in the Bitterroot Valley, an area with no grizzly bear population.

When something began breaking flag sticks and digging holes on the greens, state wildlife officials assumed it was a black bear. FWP set a trap with plans to move the animal to a nearby mountain range. But when the culprit proved to be a 2½-year-old grizzly, Jonkel, his FWP supervisors, and officials with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) weren't sure what to do with it. The grizzly is a protected species managed under strict federal laws and protocols. You can't just put one anywhere.

They considered relocating the bear to the Sapphires. But grizzlies haven't moved into that mountain range on their own, so even proposing to place one there would require a long and contentious public process. Another option was returning the bear to the population where it likely originated, either the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), which stretches from Glacier National Park south to the Blackfoot River Valley, or the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) around Yellowstone National Park. But which one? A DNA test confirming the bear's origins would take days.



“The time to figure this out is not when you have a bear sitting in a trap,” Jonkel says. “That situation really drove home the point that we’ve got to figure out what to do with grizzlies that are wandering far from the two established populations.”

In coordination with the USFWS and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), FWP decided that the bear most likely came from the NCDE and released it in the Lolo National Forest northeast of Missoula. But wildlife managers knew it was just a matter of time before the next grizzly began causing problems far from home and they’d be forced to quickly decide what to do with it.

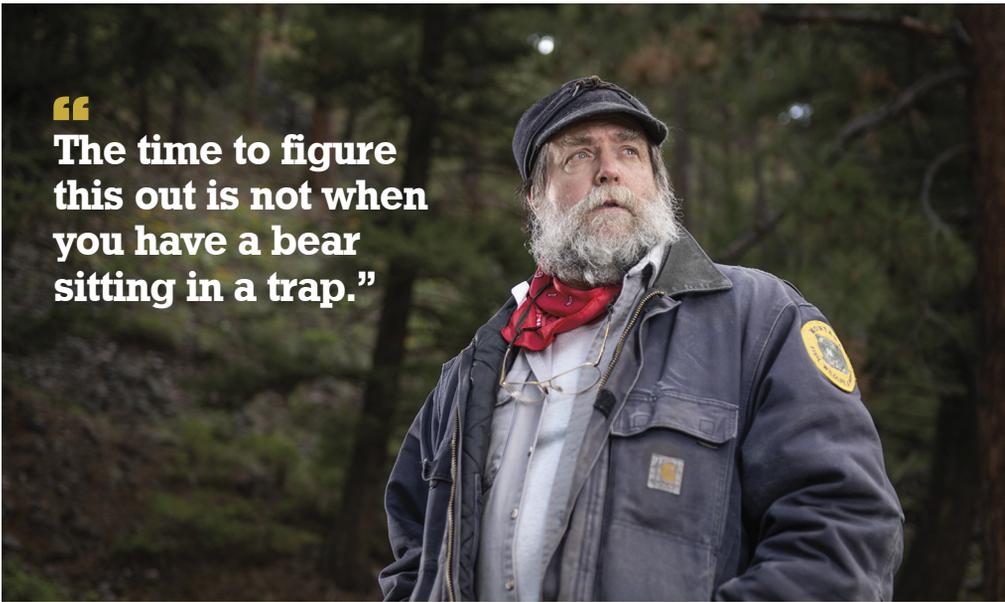
WILL THEY STAY OR WILL THEY GO?

When a grizzly is spotted within or just outside the boundaries of the NCDE or GYE, wildlife managers follow guidelines established by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. Options include leaving it alone if it’s not causing problems, or trapping and releasing it elsewhere within that ecosystem. If the bear repeatedly threatens human safety or habitually preys on livestock, another option is euthanization.

But what’s to be done with a grizzly that shows up in the upper Big Hole Valley, or east of Interstate-15 on the prairie, 100 miles or more from core populations? Such questions are part of a larger puzzle the Governor’s Grizzly Bear Advisory Council worked on over the past year. In September 2020, the 18-member citizen panel sent the governor its final report on managing and conserving grizzlies in Montana. The recommendations address issues like human safety, livestock protection, and the intrinsic and ecological value of the region’s largest and most iconic carnivore. FWP is using the recommendations to develop a statewide plan, scheduled for public review and comment in 2022, that will guide grizzly bear recovery, conservation, and management while maintaining the quality of life for people who live, work, and recreate in Montana.

“One thing the plan will do is help our biologists, bear specialists, and game wardens give people in the communities where grizzlies appear a better idea of how those bears

Jessianne Castle is a writer who lives near the Flathead Valley.



“**The time to figure this out is not when you have a bear sitting in a trap.**”

ON THE FRONT LINES Jamie Jonkel and other FWP bear management specialists who trap problem grizzlies are looking for guidance on where to put the bears. “We’ve got to figure out what to do with grizzlies that are wandering far from the two established populations,” he says.

will be managed,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. “People want to know: Are you planning to get rid of them? Are you letting them stay? If so, what will you do to safeguard us and our property?”

BUST THEN BOOM

Scientists estimate that before the 19th century 50,000 to 100,000 grizzly bears lived across western North America, stretching from the Alaskan bush to the mountains of Mexico. To protect themselves and their livestock, Euro-American settlers waged war on the large carnivores. By the mid-1900s, grizzlies in the Lower 48 had been reduced to just 2 percent of their historic range.

In 1975, with only 800 to 1,000 grizzlies remaining in all of the contiguous United States, the USFWS listed the species as threatened under the then two-year-old Endangered Species Act. The agency identified six recovery areas, which included some of the wildest ecosystems in the Lower 48: four containing grizzlies, Greater Yellowstone, Northern Continental Divide, Cabinet-Yaak, and Selkirk; and two that had no grizzlies but held ideal habitat, North Cascades and Bitterroot.

Following decades of strict conservation protocols, including a hunting ban, as well as extensive research and monitoring by

state and federal agencies, bears in the NCDE and GYE recovery areas thrived. When grizzlies were listed, the two populations in combination held 700 bears. Today the estimate is 1,000 to 1,200 for the NCDE and 750 to 1,000 for the GYE, according to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee.

In 2007 the USFWS, responsible for threatened and endangered species oversight, delisted the GYE bears, returning management to Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Environmental groups sued the agency, and federal courts overturned the delisting decision. The USFWS delisted the population again in 2017, and again federal judges sided with lawsuit plaintiffs and restored federal oversight and protections.

Meanwhile, the NCDE and GYE populations continue to grow and spread. Historically inhabitants of both mountains and prairies, grizzlies are recolonizing areas where they haven’t lived in more than a century—and where people have grown accustomed to living without bears. Grizzlies now show up in towns and on ranches, wheat fields, and even an occasional golf course. “For a long time, people thought of grizzlies as living in wilderness areas or in Glacier or Yellowstone,” McDonald says. “Now they are showing us they can live on farmland and ranchland, too, far from wilderness

areas. Managing those grizzlies is a completely different challenge.”

Meanwhile, recovery efforts continue in the Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk recovery areas, home to about 150 grizzlies. Little progress has been made to recover grizzlies in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, most of which is in Idaho, and Washington State’s North Cascades.

While the USFWS oversees recovery efforts, state and tribal wildlife departments are responsible for work on the ground. Bear specialists like Jonkel respond to conflicts between humans and grizzlies. They help people prevent bear conflicts with strategies like protecting beehives and orchards with electric fencing, and they resolve problems if bears get into trouble, sometimes capturing the animals and relocating them elsewhere. State, federal, and tribal biologists study grizzly habitat, diet, movement, and mortality.

should respond to different types of conflicts in different parts of the state, or who should pay for grizzly management. Our biggest challenges are with value-laden decisions that need to be based on knowing what Montanans as a whole want.”

That’s where the Governor’s Grizzly Bear Advisory Council comes in.

DIVERSE MIX

In the words of his executive order, Governor Steve Bullock established the council in 2019 to “develop recommendations for fundamental guidance and direction on key issues and challenges related to the conservation and management of grizzly bears in Montana, *particularly those issues on which there is significant social disagreement.*” (Italics added.)

The 18 council members were selected by the Governor’s Office and FWP from more than 150 applicants. Members were expected

ern Montana. The rest were held via remote video conference to adhere to state Covid-19 protocols. The council heard from biologists, conservation groups, and wildlife officials from Montana, Alaska, and Canada about bear biology, conservation efforts, and how communities elsewhere have successfully learned to coexist with grizzlies. The council also sought public input, receiving more than 16,000 comments from both Montanans and nonresidents, to help develop recommendations that represented a wide range of people concerned about grizzly bears.

Bullock set a late summer 2020 deadline for the council’s final report so he could begin using its recommendations as soon as possible. “I’m putting great stock...in what the council’s work is going to do,” he said during a December 2019 meeting in Missoula. “We are facing a Herculean task....You are the leaders in this state in shaping this understanding.”

“The council members took their appointment to heart,” says Heather Stokes of the University of Montana’s Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy, who facilitated the council’s deliberations with the center’s Shawn Johnson. “They spent a year developing relationships with each other, which was essential for building the respect necessary to share knowledge and understanding.”

In her experience facilitating meetings on contentious issues, Stokes says she’s learned that people can reach agreement when they earnestly listen to and respect each other’s viewpoints while feeling they can express their own views without being attacked. “Establishing trust takes time, but you can’t make progress without it,” she says.

On September 8, the council submitted its final recommendations for managing and conserving grizzlies in Montana. The 25-page public document contains the council’s consensus on public education and outreach, conflict prevention, conflict response, grizzly distribution, and management funding. “We were pleased to see the amount of agreement among such a diverse representation of interests,” McDonald says.

The one area on which the entire council could not agree was the role of hunting, a possibility if grizzlies are delisted and



GROUND RULES At a November 2019 meeting in Bozeman, the 18-member Governor’s Grizzly Bear Advisory Council listens to a facilitator with the University of Montana’s Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy before resuming discussions about the large carnivore’s future in Montana.

While the growth of grizzly populations in Montana is one of the state’s greatest wildlife conservation achievements, the expansion puts FWP in a tough position. “Bear biology is relatively easy and straightforward. We know what grizzlies do, and why,” McDonald says. “But there are so many unanswered social questions, like who should decide where grizzlies should or shouldn’t be in Montana, or how the state

to listen to and work with people from diverse backgrounds and could represent only themselves and not interest groups. Hailing from communities where grizzlies now or may soon live, the council comprised livestock producers, naturalists, community leaders, conservationists, and outfitters and other outdoor industry professionals.

The first five of the council’s 15 meetings were held at different locations around west-

management authority returns to Montana. The final report includes statements both supporting and opposing grizzly hunting. “Not reaching consensus on something as contentious as grizzly hunting is not surprising,” McDonald says. “For me, that highlights the deeply held values of the council members and makes their other agreements that much more admirable.”

Stokes adds that even though the council’s tenure ended in September, members continue to work together to find ways to further grizzly conservation. “That wouldn’t be happening without the trust they developed early in the process,” she says.

LOPSIDED DISCUSSIONS

In January 2020, during FWP’s Grizzly Bear Information and Outreach Summit in Helena, I asked agency director Martha Williams what the council means for the grizzly’s long-term recovery and conservation. “Discussions about grizzlies are too often lopsided,” Williams told me. She looked around the room at the roughly 100 people representing organizations, businesses, agencies, and campaigns vested in the future of grizzly bears. “Usually we either hear from ranchers who are concerned about grizzlies affecting their livelihoods, or we hear from people who just want to see bears, or know they’re there, and have them left alone no matter what.

“But there’s been very little discussion *among* the various factions that have a stake in grizzly bears,” Williams continued. “Until now, there’s been no opportunity for them to sit down with each other, build trust, and start to understand why other people’s values may be different from their own.”

Williams said the council represents a breakthrough in bringing diverse opinions together to forge areas of consensus. “Grizzly bears are iconic carnivores highly valued by people and cultures across the state and around the world. And they play an important role in Montana’s ecosystems and economies,” Williams said. “At the same time, they can threaten people and livestock and cause property damage and economic loss that disproportionately affects people living and working in bear country.”

How can Montana reconcile those and other issues over something as emotionally charged as grizzly bears? “We’re charting new ground,” Williams said. “The council’s job has been to tell us where to start.” 🐻

Read the council’s final report, “Recommendations and Input on the Future of Grizzly Bear Management in Montana,” at fwp.mt.gov/gbac.



WHERE TO GO NEXT? The advisory council’s recommendations provide state wildlife managers with consensus on major topics, such as bear relocation, that will help them produce a management and conservation plan that reflects a broad spectrum of public opinion.

Wildlife managers begin using grizzly council recommendations

Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division, says his staff is reviewing recommendations from the Governor’s Grizzly Bear Advisory Council’s final report, released September 8, as they start work on Montana’s first comprehensive grizzly bear management and conservation plan. “We’re still digesting the report, but are already finding many of the recommendations very helpful,” he says.

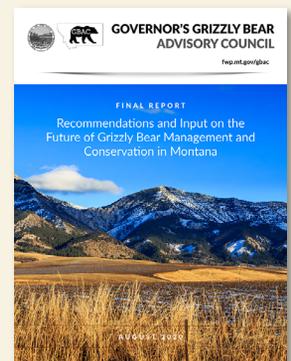
One example is the council’s advice for FWP to “continue to allow natural [grizzly] movement to new areas between all four identified recovery zones in Montana.” The zones are the NCDE, GYE, Cabinet-Yaak, and Bitterroot.

“This is important because for years the focus on grizzly bear recovery has been on the recovery areas themselves, with very little guidance on what to do about bears moving outside those areas,” McDonald says. “The council has affirmed that, at a minimum, we should explore and develop ways to allow for connectivity between recovery areas by managing habitat and working with private landowners and communities in those places so they can prepare to coexist with grizzlies.”

But that green light is not a road map. McDonald notes that many questions related to grizzly management remain unanswered. “For instance, if Montana decides to promote grizzly occupancy in the Bitterroot Mountains, does that mean allowing only natural expansion from other recovery areas, or would we actually relocate bears into remote areas there? And should we have different protocols for bears in different places, like being more lenient with a problem bear in the Flathead, because that animal is contributing to federal recovery goals, than we would for a bear in, say, Stanford?”

McDonald adds that FWP’s management plan will aim to answer questions like these so wildlife managers have a better idea what to do about specific bears that raid an orchard, kill a cow, or even dig up a golf course. “The council’s report is the skeleton of grizzly management in Montana. The management plan will put meat on the bones,” he says.

FWP’s statewide comprehensive grizzly bear management and conservation plan is scheduled for public review and comment in 2022. ■



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MARCH-APRIL 2020

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Homecoming The trumpeter swan’s long-awaited return to the Flathead and Blackfoot Valleys. By Anthony Pavkovich

MAY-JUNE 2020

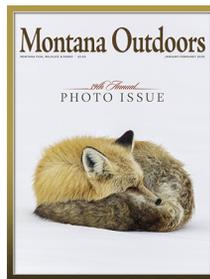
Give a Big Hand for the Big Hole Applauding the consensus-based, collaborative approach to conserving this premier southwestern Montana trout and grayling river. By Tom Reed

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SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2020

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NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2020

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