



Return of the grizzly?

Feds consider transplanting bears into Washington's North Cascades

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A grizzly bear in the North Cascades Ecosystem, a few miles north of the U.S. border in Manning Provincial Park, British Columbia. Photographed by remote camera in April 2010.

B.C. MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT

In the summer of 1993, Bill Gaines, a young wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service in Washington state, took a break from field work to climb in the Glacier Peaks Wilderness in the North Cascades. As he trekked through the remote, subalpine Napeequa Valley, Gaines spotted a furry face peering at him from behind a log some 40 feet away. It looked like a bear — cinnamon-colored, round face, small ears. But was that a shoulder hump? Gaines dropped his pack (“rather stupidly,” he recalls) and tried to get a closer look. But the creature spun around and disappeared.

“(That’s) the only time I’ve seen a bear in the Cascades where I could not say with certainty that it was a black bear,” says Gaines. Although five to 10 grizzlies supposedly roam the mountains of northwest Washington, Gaines has snagged more than 700 bear hair samples without finding a single one. But that could change.

Following the listing of the Lower 48 grizzly population under the Endangered Species Act in 1975, the U.S. Fish and

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Wildlife Service identified the North Cascades and five other areas — Yellowstone, Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, Bitterroot and the Northern Continental Divide — as grizzly recovery zones. Since then, most zones have seen steady bear population growth thanks to strong state and federal management and financial investment in recovery initiatives. In 1997, a recovery plan was developed for the North Cascades zone, and 10 years later, the Washington Legislature appropriated funding for an environmental analysis of grizzly restoration. But state and federal agencies were unable to begin work quickly, and when the recession hit the following year, the state withdrew funding for the project. The recovery plan languished, and the North Cascades grizzly seemed destined to disappear completely.

But in 2014, things turned around. This time, when National Park Service and the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission offered funding for an assessment, national, state and local agencies were ready. This January, the environmental impact statement was released, along with a draft plan to return the bears to the 6.3-million-acre North Cascades ecosystem. Now, biologists and advocates have renewed hope that one

day they’ll see a viable grizzly population in the Cascades.

The draft plan offers four alternatives for recovery, with the aim of one day achieving a population of 200 grizzlies. They range from taking no action to augmenting the population with transplanted bears from northwestern Montana and/or south-central British Columbia. One would see the initial translocation of 10 closely monitored bears with the intention of reaching 200 within 60 to 100 years. Another would move in five to seven bears per year for up to a decade. And an expedited approach could lead to 200 bears in a mere 25 years.

If the North Cascades bears are ever going to bounce back, says Wayne Kasworm, acting grizzly recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it will take that kind of intervention. Though a small population has long existed on the British Columbia side of the Cascades, major river valleys, human development and railways have prevented those grizzlies from moving south across the border, says Kasworm. But trapping and moving bears can be difficult. Not all survive the stressful journey. Some slip their radio collars and wander off. Others attack livestock or pets. Transplanting grizzlies to restore a population isn’t entirely new, though — and it’s worked before.

In 1987, Kasworm was one of the first to propose augmenting the population in the Cabinet-Yaak zone, in northwestern Montana and northern Idaho, with bears from British Columbia’s Flathead Valley. Eventually, residents and officials agreed to give it a chance, and in 1993, biologists captured a young female, fitted her with a radio collar, and drove her 150 miles through the night to the Cabinet Mountains. It was the first time a grizzly bear had ever been translocated in the United States. Since then, the Fish and Wildlife Service has introduced a total of 19 bears, and the Cabinet-Yaak population has successfully grown to over 45 individuals.

But some fear that grizzlies might harm hikers, horseback riders or mountain bikers in the North Cascades. Steve Darwood, a local outfitter, has been leading pack trips through the Pasayten and Sawtooth Wilderness for 47 years. “The people I service, they don’t want to see grizzlies here — they have a good experience without them,” he says. People should have a choice, he says; if they want to view grizzlies, they can visit Yellowstone or Canada.

The draft plan was open for comment through March 14, and eight open houses were held across Washington in February. Gaines, who retired from the Forest Service in 2011, remains hopeful that these efforts will bring grizzlies to the North Cascades. “This area is so, so wild,” he says, “and yet we don’t have that symbol of wilderness.” □