

# NEW APPROACHES TO CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ENDANGERED SPECIES MANAGEMENT: RECOVERY IN THE BITTERROOT ECOSYSTEM

HANK FISCHER, Defenders of Wildlife, 1534 Mansfield Avenue, Missoula, MT 59801, USA, email: hfischer@defenders.org  
MICHAEL ROY, National Wildlife Federation, Northern Rockies Natural Resource Center, 240 North Higgins #2, Missoula, MT, 59802, USA., email: roymike@nwf.org

**Abstract:** In the 6 recovery zones identified in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recovery plan for the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*), the Bitterroot Ecosystem of central Idaho and western Montana is the only one that no longer retains even a remnant grizzly population. With >6 million acres of unoccupied habitat, most of it designated as wilderness, the Bitterroot Ecosystem presents a unique recovery opportunity—the chance to expand bear numbers and range in the continental United States by nearly one-third, with potential for eventually linking existing bear populations in northwestern Montana and Yellowstone. We describe the Bitterroot recovery planning process to date and highlight a new, collaborative approach to grizzly recovery being promoted by several conservation and forest industry organizations. The centerpiece of this new approach is citizen participation and control in recovery decision-making. If successful, this citizen-driven approach will reduce polarization, save money, restore grizzly bears, and provide an important new model for solving contentious endangered species problems.

*Ursus* 10:603–606

**Key words:** Bitterroot, co-management, grizzly, public participation, *Ursus arctos*.

Since the grizzly bear was first listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531–1544) in 1975, conservation efforts—as outlined in the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1993)—have focused on stabilizing declining populations in 4 ecosystems in the northern Rockies, reducing human-caused mortality, improving sanitation practices (bear-proofing of rural refuse facilities, back-country camps, etc.) and educating the public. Strategies to address these critical problems are now in place. New grizzly conservation concerns include fragmentation of grizzly range, effectiveness of corridors, and genetic integrity of bear populations (Servheen and Sandstrom 1993).

While debate regarding the prospect for long-term persistence and recovery of grizzly populations in the western U.S. continues (Shaffer 1992), quantitative improvements in grizzly conservation have occurred in the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide grizzly bear ecosystems. Decreased grizzly mortality, a wider distribution of bear sightings, and increased reproductive success suggest improvement in the bear's condition. In fact, efforts are underway to evaluate grizzly delisting in the Yellowstone Ecosystem in the foreseeable future.

Despite this perception of progress in grizzly conservation, most scientists and advocates agree that significant expansion of grizzly range and numbers must occur before grizzlies can be considered recovered south of Canada. Current populations are too small and too fragmented to be considered secure.

In recent years, both managing agencies and the non-governmental community have turned their attention to-

ward expanding grizzly range and numbers. With 6 million acres of unoccupied habitat—much of which is designated wilderness—the Bitterroot Ecosystem in central Idaho and western Montana presents the most important grizzly conservation opportunity in the continental United States. The North Cascades Recovery Zone in Washington will also be a key component of recovery in the lower 48 states, through augmentation of the remnant population. The Bitterroot Ecosystem contains the largest complex of roadless country in the U.S. south of Canada. While the actual boundaries of a recovery or experimental area have not yet been defined, conservative estimates of habitat availability place a recovered Bitterroot population at 200–400 individuals; such a population would increase the total number of grizzlies in the western United States by one-third (Servheen et al. 1991).

Can reintroduction of a threatened grizzly bear population can take place given the current attitudes in Idaho? Public confidence in government is low and fear concerning the ESA is high; success largely depends on how effectively local constituencies are engaged in the grizzly recovery process and on how successfully current human uses of wildlands can be accommodated.

## HISTORICAL SETTING

Historical records indicate that grizzlies were widespread in the Bitterroot Ecosystem throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century (C.H. Merriam from 1922 and W. Wright from 1909 as quoted in Davis et al. 1985). While occasional reports persist, no grizzly sightings in the Bitterroot Ecosystem have been confirmed since the 1940s (Davis et al. 1985; J. Weaver,

U.S. Fish and Wildl. Serv., Missoula, Mont., pers. commun., 1995). Aerial and ground searches conducted during the 1980s were negative, and a review of all sighting records from this century classified only 16 of 88 sightings as "probable" (Melquist 1985). Similarly, a remote camera survey produced no evidence of grizzlies (Kunkel et al. 1991).

Reasons for the grizzly's extirpation in the region are conjectural, but evidence points toward a combination of effects, most notably uncontrolled mortality by humans in response to sheep depredations early in this century. To a lesser extent, loss of anadromous salmon (*Oncorhynchus* spp.) runs and habitat conversion through a century of fire suppression have also contributed (Davis et al. 1985). Population recovery through natural recolonization is highly unlikely due to the ecosystem's distance from existing grizzly populations (70 km to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and 385 km to the Yellowstone Ecosystem). Further, the area is increasingly isolated from other recovery areas by interstate highways and rural development.

## THE RECOVERY PROCESS

The current Bitterroot recovery effort dates from the release of the original grizzly bear recovery plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1982), which called for evaluation of the Bitterroot Ecosystem as a recovery area. Based on field evaluations, Butterfield and Almack (1985) concluded that the Bitterroot provided superior habitat that met 7 essential characteristics of grizzly habitat (Craighead et al. 1982; space, isolation, sanitation, denning, safety, vegetation types, and food).

Following several years of public hearings and meetings of a citizen's advisory committee, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) in 1994 approved the Bitterroot Chapter of the Recovery Plan (IGBC, created in 1983 by an agreement between the Governors of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming and the U.S. Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior, is a state-federal committee that oversees monitoring, education, research, and recovery actions for the grizzly in the lower 48 states). Congress appropriated funds in 1994 to complete an environmental impact statement (EIS) on Bitterroot Recovery, and in early 1995 the newly hired EIS team leader began to assemble an interdisciplinary team of federal, state, and tribal representatives. As currently envisioned, a draft EIS will be completed in early 1996 and a final EIS released in the July of 1996; if an alternative involving reintroductions is selected, initial reintroductions could, in theory, begin in the summer of 1997.

## NEW APPROACHES TO CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The Bitterroot grizzly environmental review comes on the heels of gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) reintroductions in Yellowstone National Park and in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness south of the Bitterroot area in early 1995. Further, endangered species programs are under increased scrutiny by some segments of the public. While the recent wolf reintroductions appear successful, the Yellowstone releases were the culmination of more than a decade of polarized, acrimonious, and expensive debate. This clearly speaks to a need for more efficient and less confrontational approaches to species recovery.

Federal and state agencies tried to address public concern about meaningful citizen participation by creating a citizen's advisory committee in 1991. Many participants in this process, however, found it confrontational, non-productive, and an inadequate forum for reaching consensus. With this in mind, 3 organizations representing significantly divergent views on grizzly recovery—Defenders of Wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Resource Organization on Timber Supply (an Idaho-based umbrella organization representing forest industry workers, labor unions, and small and large industries)—began meeting informally in 1993 to exchange views on grizzly recovery issues. The group was soon joined by a fourth organization, the Intermountain Forest Industry Association.

These organizations discovered considerable overlap in their visions of grizzly recovery. Each espoused the basic concept of recovery and eventual delisting of the bear, each recognized the benefits of a streamlined process that minimized polarization and reduced costs, and each sought to minimize social and economic costs to local communities that might accompany grizzly recovery. All recognized the importance of engaging local publics in recovery planning. Perhaps most importantly, all organizations believed the wildlands of the Bitterroot Ecosystem could sustain both a substantial grizzly bear population and a healthy local economy.

These 4 organizations have cooperatively advanced Bitterroot grizzly restoration in several ways. First, in 1994, they wrote to members of the Idaho and Montana congressional delegations seeking funding to initiate an EIS on Bitterroot grizzly bear reintroduction. Coming at a time when many wildlife projects were under attack—especially those involving controversial predators—this joint letter played an important role in convincing doubting legislators of the merit

of initiating an EIS on Bitterroot grizzly reintroduction.

Second, the coalition led development of an information booklet on Bitterroot grizzly recovery which was eventually used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as its primary public information tool during the preliminary stages of the EIS process. The purpose of the booklet was to ensure that all citizens were operating from a common set of facts.

Third, in early 1995, the coalition hosted a series of public meetings in rural communities where opinion-makers and other local citizens were invited to present their concerns. These meetings alerted local citizens that a new, collaborative approach was being tried.

Finally, the coalition developed a Bitterroot grizzly bear recovery alternative which it submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for consideration as an alternative in the draft environmental impact statement. This alternative has 2 key parts. The first is that grizzly reintroduction would occur as an experimental, non-essential population under Section 10(j) of the ESA. This parallels the experimental reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone and central Idaho. The second part is new and innovative: joint (or co-) management of the grizzly recovery program by a locally based team of citizens and agency officials.

Designation of Bitterroot grizzly bears as an experimental population would relax some standard ESA provisions, but only to the point where recovery of the species is not compromised. The experimental designation provides agencies with maximum flexibility to meet concerns of local citizens while providing for species recovery. Regulations promulgated under the experimental provision can be highly adaptive and site-specific. All actions, however, must maintain the purpose and conviction of the Act and must demonstrably lead toward recovery (Kohm 1991).

Experimental designation is appropriate to the Bitterroot situation since the area does not have an existing bear population, lies within historic grizzly range, and is geographically separate from existing grizzly populations. The experimental designation has been tested with other large carnivores, including red wolves (*Canis rufus*) in the Southeast United States and gray wolves in the Yellowstone and central Idaho wolf reintroductions. While this approach clearly did not eliminate conflict over Yellowstone wolf recovery, attention to reducing economic costs and to minimizing land-use restrictions did result in eventual tolerance, if not acceptance, of wolf recovery by all but the most strident opponents.

Use of the experimental designation alone, however, does not guarantee support of local residents. The key to gaining support lies in giving local citizens a larger and more meaningful role in bear management. Conservation and scientific communities have faced increasing criticism in recent years for their perceived inattention to the needs of rural communities. Brussard (1995:1) recently asserted the need to “encourage the integration of local communities and conservation efforts everywhere” and bemoaned the seeming reluctance of professionals to do so, “particularly in the American west.” He continued, “Clearly, if people see that conservation goals are consistent with their own they will become part of the solution rather than remain a major part of the problem.”

With this critical failing of past conservation efforts in mind, the coalition has proposed the establishment of a Citizen’s Management Committee as the centerpiece of the Bitterroot grizzly experimental population designation. This committee would be comprised of representatives from government and the private sector. The committee would consist of single representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, Idaho Fish and Game, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. It would also include 7 citizens from Idaho and 5 citizens from Montana. The citizen representatives would be appointed by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior based on recommendations from the Governors of Idaho and Montana.

While state and federal agencies would manage the bears on a day-to-day basis, the Committee would set policy, develop yearly work plans, and oversee the controversial aspects of grizzly conservation. The Committee would provide informed citizens the opportunity for direct involvement in grizzly management decisions. They would be responsible for developing plans that restore grizzlies yet minimize effects on local economies. If citizens have this responsibility, we believe grizzly bear conservation will become less polarized, less time-consuming, and more oriented toward problem-solving. Citizen–agency co-management of endangered species could become an important conservation technique.

State and federal agencies face both administrative and philosophical barriers to co-management, among them the procedural complexities of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA; 5 USC APP) and the natural hesitance of decision-makers to relinquish control in planning processes. However, FACA does not apply to actions stemming from the implementation of signed recovery plans, and the experimental provision of the ESA places no restrictions on the array of possible management approaches, including delegation of management authority to public–private bod-

ies. And to their credit, agency officials have shown an unexpectedly high level of receptivity to the power-sharing that co-management would entail.

## SUMMARY

The ongoing Bitterroot grizzly recovery process presents several lessons relevant to endangered species recovery efforts. First, partnerships between conservationists and traditional opponents of conservation can be powerful political tools to initiate recovery efforts. Second, local publics will tolerate recovery program implementation more readily if local citizens participate in management and feel some control in the process. And finally, by reducing polarization, collaborative recovery processes save money better spent on recovery actions than on confrontation and litigation. If the initial steps in the process are indicative of future success, Bitterroot grizzly recovery may demonstrate a needed model for cooperative endangered species recovery programs.

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