

# EXPERIENCES WITH A COMMITTEE OF USER GROUPS EXAMINING GRIZZLY BEAR RESTORATION IN IDAHO

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*Abstract:* A committee established by the Idaho Legislature to oversee the recovery process for the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) in Idaho was able to reach agreement on a procedure to restore this highly controversial species. The results of this agreement led to continued involvement of Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) in the recovery process, and broader understanding of concerns of citizens by all agencies involved.

*Ursus* 10:613–614

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Addressing highly controversial problems involving the grizzly bear and other wildlife through lay citizens groups may be a reasonable means of arriving at compromise solutions in some situations. In restoring grizzly bears to the central Idaho recovery area, a committee established by the Idaho Legislature reached a compromise which may help initiate the restoration process. A number of issues remained unresolved, including the possible inadequacy of spring bear habitat, provision of travel corridors for bears between recovery areas, possible restoration into wilderness south of the Salmon River, and the elimination of what may be the most productive bear habitat in the North Fork of the Clearwater from the agreement. However, the agreement stands as an example of cooperation between diverse interest groups and may facilitate restoration into important vacant habitat and establish a foundation from which other issues may subsequently be considered.

## GRIZZLY BEAR OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

The Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1993) for the northwestern U.S. identified the central Idaho wilderness areas as suitable habitat for grizzly restoration. As this became public, controversy developed which eventually involved elected officials. In 1993 the 52nd Legislature of the State of Idaho established a Grizzly Bear Oversight Committee to guide the development of conservation plans for this species in Idaho (House Bill 317). The Director of the Idaho Department of Agriculture was authorized to appoint 3 individuals representing mining, timber, and livestock to the committee. The Director of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game was authorized to appoint 2 people representing recreation and wildlife to the committee. The chairs of the House and Senate Natural Resources Committees of the Idaho Legislature provided oversight of committee activities, and the 2 directors

served as chairs. Subsequently, 2 co-chairs were appointed from the committee.

The Grizzly Bear Oversight Committee met 5 times between July 1993 and October 1994 and held 4 evening hearings, in Orofino, Grangeville, Idaho Falls, and Sandpoint. These hearings revealed a wide range of opinions concerning grizzly bear management, conservation, and restoration. Concerns centered on how bear management practices would affect other uses of bear habitat, including access and logging. Some concern about human safety was expressed. Support for bear conservation came largely in the form of preserving the wildlife heritage and associated wildlands that many Idahoans cherish. A general consensus among interest groups eventually developed for restoring grizzly bears to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness using the nonessential experimental population provision of the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1531–1544), which allows for substantial flexibility in management. An extensive recovery area would be designated so any bears which become problems within the region could be dealt with under that provision (bears occurring outside of the recovery area would not be considered nonessential experimental).

The Oversight Committee further recommended confining reintroduction to the wilderness, not implementing land-use restrictions for bears outside of the Wilderness, and making the State of Idaho an integral partner in developing the Environmental Impact Statement for reintroduction. These recommendations were accepted by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, which has responsibility for providing policy and guidance for management of this species. During the hearings held by the Oversight Committee, it became apparent that federal agencies need to provide more information to the public in a timely and comprehensive manner and to coordinate management of this species between agencies more effectively. Because grizzly bears affect people primarily at the local level, direct involvement by the State of Idaho in their management will facilitate

prompt and effective resolution of problems which may arise.

The Oversight Committee submitted a report to the Idaho Legislature in February 1995 which included the following recommendations:

1. A coordinated interagency effort to inform the public should be made. All government agencies must inform the public in a timely and comprehensive manner about matters concerning grizzly bears and their habitat. Conflict between federal agencies promotes confusion and misinformation.
2. Grizzly bear management can be more effectively coordinated and implemented by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) than by federal agencies. Conservation officers and others working for IDFG have extensive knowledge of people and local situations which need special attention in grizzly bear management. The federal agencies tend to be too far removed from local situations or too busy to understand and work effectively with the local public on matters concerning grizzly bears. IDFG is, and should remain, an integral partner in conservation and management of this species in the state.
3. In all areas visited, people from various user groups were willing to cooperate to resolve problems and make progress. The general consensus over how to recover grizzly bears in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area was a prime example of the cooperative interest. This willingness can be capitalized upon if agencies follow through on plans and retain and enhance credibility by keeping close contact with the user groups.

The Idaho Legislature accepted this report and authorized the Oversight Committee to continue its activities. This allowed the IDFG to continue to be involved in restoration of grizzly bears in the state. A similar committee established to consider the restoration of gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) into Idaho could not reach an agreement, was deauthorized by the Legislature, and IDFG was prohibited from participating in wolf recovery activities in the state. Obviously, the agreement among the bear group had a positive influence on the bear recovery program.

Following establishment of the Oversight Committee, a citizens' group representing environmental interests in Montana and industrial timber interests in Idaho developed a proposed rule for restoring the grizzly to central Idaho (Fischer and Roy 1998). The Legislative Oversight Committee coordinated their recommendations with

this citizens' group to make their rule more acceptable to a more diverse array of interests. The rule was presented to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Team as an alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement which is being developed. Thus, citizens participation in bear recovery efforts have been considerably expanded and is influencing the recovery process.

## CONCLUSION

Restoration of large carnivores into suitable unoccupied habitat can best be accomplished with the advice and consent of those most likely to be affected. Human-caused mortality is commonly acknowledged to limit population increases in grizzly bears (Peek et al. 1987). The challenge for the agencies now is to continue to solicit public involvement, to inform people adequately, and to demonstrate a willingness to consider recommendations. Recovery of grizzly bears may best be considered an exercise in adaptive management, wherein we acknowledge uncertainty and learn as we implement and modify the program as necessary (Walters 1986). For this approach to succeed, we must keep constituents adequately informed and involved and alter plans and activities only with due consideration for public concerns. General acceptance by the public of grizzly restoration is by no means assured through the activities of the Oversight Committee, and whether a viable population will occur in central Idaho will not be known until well into the next century. Committees of this nature can either help or hinder restoration efforts depending upon their behavior. At this point, the committee responsible for providing oversight on grizzly bear restoration in central Idaho to the state legislature has helped the restoration process.

## LITERATURE CITED

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