

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Counting Bears and Beans

By Keith Hammer

September 25, 2008, Lakeshore Country Journal

The good news announced recently is that there are more grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem than previously estimated. The bad news is that this does not necessarily mean there are more grizzly bears than before, although we certainly hope that is the case. It may simply mean that counting methods have improved.

Indeed, the unprecedented scope of the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project is exceeded only by its price tag - \$4.8 million. The largest non-invasive study of bears to date and the first ever ecosystem-wide scientific assessment of grizzlies in the 12,187-square-mile NCDE, the Project collected 34,000 bear hair samples in the summer of 2004. The DNA analysis has now been completed and the numbers crunched.

The DNA results identified 563 individual grizzly bears. Statistical models were then used to account for bears that didn't leave their hair on a grid network of barbed wire hair snagging sites to arrive at a total population estimate of 765 bears. This is two-and-a-half times the admittedly conservative estimate based on the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, which relied on often casual sightings of females with cubs while government employees were tramping around the ecosystem on often unrelated business.

While there is no doubt that more intensive counting methods resulted in the counting of more bears, whether the bear population trend is steady, increasing or decreasing remains to be determined by several years remaining in a companion seven-year trend-monitoring study. Many have already made the mistake of assuming the DNA count indicates the NCDE population is increasing. This, however, is the equivalent of guessing there are 200 beans in a jar and then claiming the number of beans increased once they are spilled out and found to number 500 upon careful counting.

While the Project results indicate good genetic diversity exists in the population and that it has not become isolated from populations in Canada, it also found that less interbreeding has begun to occur across the western portion of the Highway 2 corridor, which also includes railroad tracks and a string of human habitation. And, in spite of the higher population estimate, the Project found that female grizzly bear mortality in 2004 still exceeded levels believed sustainable by the population.

The harnessing of nuclear power allows us to generate electricity for our homes or build a bomb of unprecedented destruction. So this \$4.8 million single-year number of 765 can be used for good or bad, depending on whether land and wildlife managers use it to maintain wise management standards or use it as an excuse to do away with them.

The Project web site notes "Although they are fairly secure within Glacier National Park, when bears move outside the park boundaries, they are exposed to a variety of mortality risks. Because grizzly bear populations to the south and east of Glacier

National Park are declining while a population to the northwest is growing, population trends in the park cannot be inferred from neighboring areas.” As we wait another several years for results of the NCDE-wide trend-monitoring study, we cannot forget that smaller, area-specific studies like the ten-year South Fork Grizzly Bear Study found the northern Swan Range population of grizzly bears declining at a rate that could halve that population in just thirty years.

Nor can we allow land and wildlife managers to write off segments of the NCDE population simply because the overall population may be found to be stable or increasing. Just as Congress and the administration saw fit to protect grizzly bears in the “Lower 48” under the Endangered Species Act so people don’t have to travel to Alaska and Canada to see them, we need to protect bears in the Swan Range for their own sake and not rationalize that there are plenty of bears to see in Glacier National Park.

Indeed, the Project found big differences in grizzly bear densities across the NCDE, with the highest densities residing in Glacier National Park and lesser densities residing further south in the ecosystem. Another look at the data is being taken to determine to what degree human impacts are affecting this distribution of grizzly bears.

Meanwhile, previous studies abound that point to the need to limit motorized access to bear habitat and to keep clean camps and homes in bear country if we are to conserve them. The Flathead National Forest needs over \$2 million to follow through on commitments to restore habitat for grizzly bears, bull trout and other fish and wildlife. Let’s not forget to fund good-paying jobs that physically restore the bears’ habitat as we spend millions for researchers to count bears.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



A sow grizzly bear and her cub cross a hiking trail in Glacier National Park. Keith Hammer photo.