

# Grizzly bear recovery planning in the British Columbia portion of the North Cascades: Lessons learned and re-learned

Matthew A. Austin<sup>1</sup>

Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, P.O. Box 9338, Stn Prov Govt, Victoria, BC V8W 9M1, Canada

**Abstract:** The process of recovering small populations of grizzly bears such as the one occupying the North Cascades Mountains of southwestern British Columbia and northwestern Washington is a long-term one from both biological and social perspectives, and carries uncertain prospects for success. I describe the development of a grizzly bear recovery plan for the British Columbia portion of the North Cascades Ecosystem and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the approach used. I discuss common challenges for any effort to recover a small grizzly bear population and suggest ways to address these challenges and to build successful recovery plans for remnant and extirpated grizzly bear populations.

**Key words:** consultation, grizzly bear, North Cascades, public involvement, recovery planning, scientific uncertainty, stakeholders, *Ursus arctos*

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The North Cascades grizzly bear population is one of 7 in British Columbia designated as threatened under the provincial Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy and in need of recovery to improve their long-term viability (Fig. 1, 2). It is estimated <25 animals remain in this 9,807 km<sup>2</sup> area. A habitat assessment of the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Population Unit (GBPU) found that under ideal conditions, a population of approximately 250–300 grizzly bears could be supported in the area (North Cascades Grizzly Bear Recovery Team [NCGBRT] 2003).

The North Cascades grizzly bear population is shared with Washington State, where it is listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (16 U.S. Code 1531–1544). A grizzly bear recovery zone has been delineated in the North Cascades of Washington State, and a chapter dealing with the North Cascades Ecosystem Recovery Zone was approved and added to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan in 1997 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1997).

The primary factors believed to have caused the decline of the North Cascades grizzly bear population date back to the mid-nineteenth century when high numbers of grizzly bears were killed through commercial trapping and active persecution (Sullivan 1983, Almack et al. 1993). The remnant population has not recovered in the approximately 150 years since this population

bottleneck occurred (Gyug 1998). The reasons for the lack of recovery are believed to include continuing human-caused mortality and small population effects, including potential inbreeding depression. The availability of effective habitat currently is not considered to limit the growth of the population (NCGBRT 2003).

Involving stakeholders in developing controversial projects such as grizzly bear recovery plans is a challenge for wildlife managers. Commonly, government agency personnel develop draft plans and then consult with stakeholders. Due to opposition and delays associated with this approach, efforts are increasingly being made or encouraged to involve stakeholders in the development of such strategies (Peek 1998, Clark et al. 2002, Schoen and Miller 2002).

## Overview of the Recovery Plan

A draft recovery plan (North Cascades Grizzly Bear Recovery Team 2001) was prepared by the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Recovery Team for the British Columbia (BC) portion of the ecosystem in 2001. The team was comprised of representatives from provincial agencies responsible for the management of natural resources and their uses including mining, forestry, wildlife, and parks as well as representatives from the North Cascades Ecosystem Subcommittee of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee in the U.S. Non-governmental stakeholders were not represented on the recovery team.

The recovery plan for the North Cascades GBPU was based on the goal of removing the population from

<sup>1</sup>Matt.Austin@gems7.gov.bc.ca

threatened status by the year 2050. Based on the current information and the approach used to evaluate the conservation status of populations, recovery in the North Cascades would be defined as a population of approximately 150 grizzly bears.

The recovery goal is supported by 7 objectives:

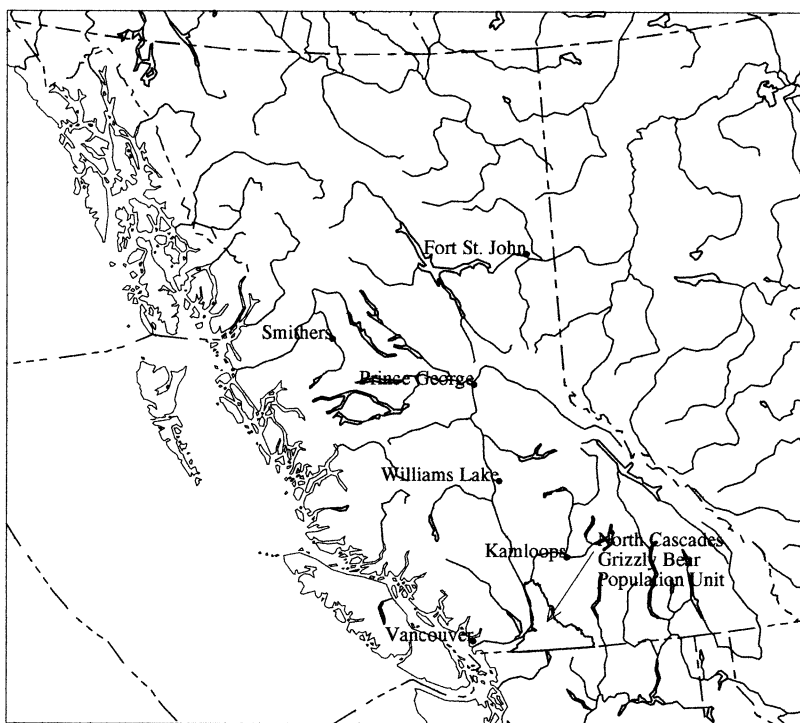
1. Provide habitat of sufficient quantity and quality to support a viable population.
2. Prevent population fragmentation and maintain genetic diversity.
3. Increase the number of grizzly bears.
4. Minimize the potential for grizzly bear–human conflicts.
5. Minimize human-caused mortality of grizzly bears.
6. Increase public knowledge of, and support for, grizzly bear recovery.
7. Facilitate interagency cooperation and management.

The recovery plan recognizes the importance of core areas (areas >500 meters from an open road and >10 hectares) and therefore includes a strategy to minimize their loss. When new roads are built or closed roads are opened that affect core area, the loss of core area would be offset through access management elsewhere. These mitigation efforts would take place in consultation with stakeholder groups in each area (NCGBRT 2003).

Augmentation of the population is believed to be critical for recovery, given that the population has not increased in decades (Gyug 1998). The recovery plan proposes that up to 6 grizzly bears be released in the North Cascades of British Columbia over 5 years. The recovery plan calls for these bears to be subadult females with no history of human conflict. Prior to the first release, a hazard assessment would be completed for the augmentation area and key issues identified from the assessment addressed (e.g., improvement in sanitation in areas near release sites). Any grizzly bears released would be radiocollared and carefully monitored (NCGBRT 2003).

### The consultation process

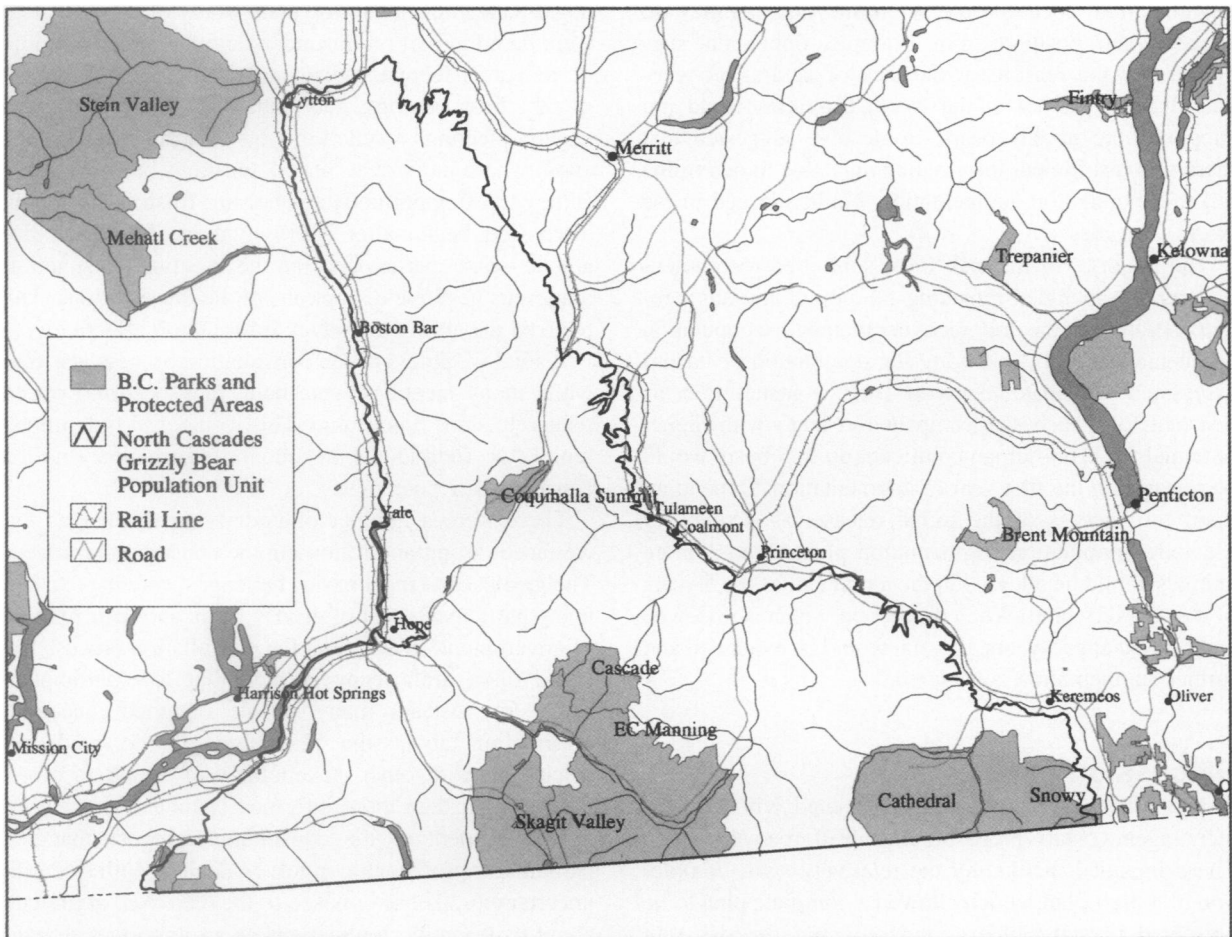
Consultation on the draft recovery plan took place from January to May 2001. A total of 24 meetings were held



**Fig. 1. The North Cascades Grizzly Bear Population Unit, British Columbia, Canada.**

with specific stakeholder groups, and 9 open houses were held in the region. A letter was mailed to a stakeholder list informing them of the draft recovery plan and the consultation process. The stakeholder list was developed by recovery team members by identifying individuals and groups, obtaining the names and addresses of individuals and businesses with resource tenures in the North Cascades (i.e. forestry, mining, and grazing tenures), and using existing stakeholder lists for protected areas in the North Cascades. Groups or individuals that contacted the recovery team were added to the list. The draft recovery plan was also posted on the Internet (<http://wlapwww.gov.bc.ca/wld/grzz/index.htm>); written input was accepted as letters or electronic mail.

The input received during the consultation process included the following concerns: the plan was a done deal and there was little likelihood of substantive changes being made; measures with greater impacts to stakeholders will be implemented in the future if recovery is not successful; a recovering grizzly bear population represented an unacceptable risk to safety and property; the habitat can not support more grizzly bears; augmentation will continue even if it is unsuccessful; the area is too close to population centers and is important for



**Fig. 2. The North Cascades Grizzly Bear Population Unit, British Columbia, Canada.**

recreation; the initiative is being pushed by U.S. interests; the cost of the recovery plan is too high; and the recovery plan will limit activities in the North Cascades that may impact grizzly bears. In addition, some suggested that recovery was unnecessary given that the population had been stable for a long time and there were healthy grizzly bear populations in other places.

Others supported conserving the North Cascades grizzly bear population as well as access planning and maintaining the area's wilderness character. Some individuals and groups indicated they believed the recovery plan would benefit other species and some human activities. Further input suggested that the draft recovery plan represented a reasonable balance between human uses of the North Cascades and grizzly bear recovery.

In July 2002, the Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection appointed a task force to review the draft

recovery plan and the input from the consultation process, and to make recommendations on the completion and implementation of the recovery plan. The task force included representatives from First Nations; forest, ranching, and mining industries; outdoor recreationists; local residents; hunters; and conservationists. In August 2002, a letter was sent to stakeholders informing them of the task force's appointment and mandate and of a web site with a summary of the input received during the consultation process and the recovery team's responses to this input including proposed revisions to the recovery plan.

Population augmentation was one of the major issues addressed by the task force. The strategy to augment the North Cascades population with up to 5 grizzly bears a year for 5 years was the most controversial element of the draft recovery plan due to concerns over the risks to public safety and private property. Opponents of

augmentation focused on scientific uncertainties to support their positions. For example, opponents suggested that the reason for the lack of natural recovery was that the habitat in the North Cascades could not support more grizzly bears. Some also suggested that there was insufficient information available to determine whether population augmentation would succeed in the North Cascades.

The majority of the task force submitted recommendations that included replacing the population augmentation strategy in the draft recovery plan with a population augmentation trial. Following the completion of hazard assessment and abatement work (such as installing bear-resistant food caches at campsites in areas with higher potential for bear-human conflicts), up to 3 bears would be released in the first year of augmentation. Depending upon the success of the initial release, as defined by a detailed population augmentation plan, up to 3 more animals would be released in the remainder of the 5 years of the recovery plan. When the recovery plan is reviewed and revised after 5 years, the trial would be evaluated and further augmentation considered.

## Discussion

A number of benefits were associated with government agency staff preparing the draft recovery plan. These included facilitating the relatively swift completion of a draft plan, which allowed a complete plan to be presented to stakeholders, and reducing the risk that some stakeholders would apply political influence to the development of the plan.

But the process also had a number of weaknesses. The greatest was the lack of stakeholder and public involvement in the development of the plan, which resulted in opposition during the consultation phase. This opposition was based on the principle that such involvement should have occurred despite the comprehensive nature of the consultation process. Stakeholder meetings and open houses were hampered in their effectiveness at obtaining broad input from participants because a small number of individuals commonly dominated the discussion. This was further exacerbated by outspoken participants sometimes claiming to speak for others at the meetings. I believe this made it less likely that different views would be expressed, as that would have required directly refuting these outspoken individuals.

The lack of stakeholder involvement during draft recovery plan development meant that many individuals attending the consultation process meetings shared strong

negative feelings about the plan. Many of these feelings were based in part on misunderstanding the implications of the draft recovery plan and limited knowledge of grizzly bear ecology and behavior. These and other negative feelings resulted in a burning pockets phenomenon, where individuals asked questions or stated views at the earliest opportunity and became frustrated when the discussion began after a presentation. The frustration among some participants at the meetings resulted in numerous negative disruptions of the presentations. This reduced the ability to convey information effectively.

A final weakness of the consultation process was that, while many meetings were held, they occurred over a relatively short time frame. This resulted in little opportunity for individuals to obtain information and reconsider their positions.

There were a number of underlying challenges that we faced during and following the consultation process. The greatest and most basic challenges were the fear that many participants had of grizzly bears and their mistrust of government. In addition, the consultation process was based on a draft recovery plan that few participants had read. Instead, many people obtained inaccurate information about the plan through the media or discussion with other stakeholders or members of the public rather than more informed channels.

One element of the consultation process that was particularly problematic involved dealing with scientific uncertainties. Those opposed to the plan used arguments about its scientific foundations as an important strategy for blocking its approval or causing it to be substantially revised. Discussions centering on these uncertainties interfered with the facilitator's ability to focus on the main objective of addressing the plan's impact on the interests of the meeting participants.

The task force partially mitigated the challenges encountered during the consultation process due to lack of stakeholder involvement by undertaking a detailed review. The task force review process allowed representatives from the major sectors involved to discuss the issues in detail, both with a recovery team representative and each other. I believe that the revisions to the recovery plan that were made as a result of the task force's recommendations increased the likelihood of the recovery plan gaining the local support that is critical to its long-term success.

## Management implications

Those who wish to develop recovery plans for small grizzly bear populations should seek the benefits

associated with both involving stakeholders in the process at an early stage (i.e. prior to drafting the plan) and having a team responsible for drafting the plan that is comprised of technical experts (Peek 1998). Early involvement of stakeholders is particularly important where population augmentation or re-introduction is being considered (Clark et al. 2002). While our approach of using a focused group of agency personnel facilitated timely development of a recovery plan that addressed biological issues, it did not allow significant public involvement in the plan's development. The mechanism for public involvement must be carefully considered, however, to ensure that the full range of interests is represented and that this involvement does not unduly impede progress. One fundamental step is for stakeholders to be provided with terms of reference that clearly delineate the nature of the input being sought and the requirements for participating in the process. For example, the terms of reference might clearly state that a recovery plan will be developed and provide a definition of recovery in this context.

One option for involving stakeholders in recovery planning is to provide an opportunity for stakeholder groups to be represented on a liaison committee working with the group responsible for preparing and implementing the recovery plan. This model provides a number of benefits over direct representation of stakeholders on recovery teams, including focusing discussions on the issues of interest to stakeholders and thereby reducing the risk of losing stakeholder interest and participation over time. This approach would also allow stakeholders to provide input on the scientific data and assumptions underlying the plan and reduce the use of debates about scientific uncertainties as a delaying tactic by those who fear impacts from recovery.

Developing a grizzly bear recovery plan for an area with the high number of interests involved in the North Cascades area would take approximately 2 years, if the process used only government personnel. If a liaison committee approach were taken, with a parallel group of stakeholder representatives consulted throughout the development of the recovery plan, the process might require 3 years. Direct representation of stakeholders on the recovery team likely would increase the time needed to complete a plan to 4 or more years.

If a plan is developed by only government personnel, one should expect that the consultation process will need to be more extensive in terms of both the time and effort involved than it would be if stakeholders were involved. For example, in the North Cascades it took 2½ years to progress from the release of the draft recovery plan

to the submission of the final plan for approval—longer than the time to prepare the draft recovery plan. It will be difficult to achieve the level of initial public support that could be obtained through stakeholder involvement even after an extensive consultation process combined with flexibility in revising the plan.

Regardless of whether stakeholders are involved in the development of a recovery plan, challenges should be expected during consultation on a draft plan. Options for discussing the draft plan with participants in small groups in the consultation process should be considered where practical. Effective, independent, and unbiased facilitation is critical to the effectiveness of meetings with larger groups. A focus should be placed on identifying the interests of participants and, where possible, on educating them about the difference between positional and interest-based approaches to negotiation (Fisher et al. 1991). It may be necessary to query a participant on underlying reasons for a concern or about unstated concerns that may motivate a particular line of questioning as opposed to simply responding to their statement or question.

Prior to initiating a recovery process for a small grizzly bear population, it is critical that those involved, including decision-makers, know that gaining support for recovery actions will be a slow process that will likely be faced with substantial initial opposition. In some cases it may not be possible to allay the fears and concerns of a substantial portion of stakeholders and the public regarding recovery efforts until those individuals actually see recovery occurring—absent the impacts they feared.

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