

# Promoting understanding: The approach of the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Outreach Project

Chris P. Morgan<sup>1,5</sup>, James Davis<sup>2</sup>, Tim Ford<sup>3</sup>, and Nan Laney<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Insight Wildlife Management, PO Box 28656, Bellingham, WA 98228, USA*

<sup>2</sup>*Conservation Partnership Center, 2219 Fir Street SE, Olympia, WA 98501, USA*

<sup>3</sup>*PO Box 3848, Omak, WA 98841, USA*

<sup>4</sup>*PO Box 28656, Bellingham, WA 98228, USA*

**Abstract:** The North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE) in Washington State is one of 6 grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) recovery zones in the lower 48 states and is contiguous with the grizzly bear population of south central British Columbia (BC). Fewer than 20 grizzly bears are estimated to remain in the NCE. Observations and verified grizzly bear sign are rare, and public knowledge of grizzly bears is very limited. Ideally, perceptions and attitudes toward grizzly bears should be based on accurate information so residents can make well informed decisions and comments regarding grizzly bear recovery. The objective of the Grizzly Bear Outreach Project (GBOP) is to address public concerns and provide factual information about grizzly bear ecology and behavior, sanitation and safety in bear country, and policies associated with the recovery process. The GBOP strives to engage community members in a process of education that targets people living, recreating, and working in the NCE. The approach includes community perceptions analyses, one-on-one meetings, small group meetings, coalition activities, and the development and distribution of associated educational resources (e.g., brochure, fact sheets, slide show, web site). Current activities also include an evaluation of project effectiveness that consists of baseline and follow-up telephone surveys with randomly selected NCE residents, quarterly telephone interviews with key informants, and content analysis of local newspapers and government and organization communications. The GBOP was initiated in April 2002 in the northeastern NCE and expanded to the northwestern NCE in September 2003. In this paper we describe our efforts and the philosophy behind the GBOP.

**Key words:** community outreach, education, grizzly bear, information, North Cascades Ecosystem, public opinion, *Ursus arctos*

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The grizzly bear was listed as a threatened species in the coterminous USA by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1975. Six recovery ecosystems have been established since that time, including the North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE), designated in 1991. The NCE is the largest grizzly bear recovery ecosystem encompassing approximately 24,800 km<sup>2</sup> in North Central Washington. The ecosystem extends for an additional 10,350 km<sup>2</sup> in south-central BC, Canada (Gaines et al. 2000).

The NCE historically supported a significant grizzly bear population, according to records compiled by Bjorkland (1980), Sullivan (1983), and Almack et al. (1993). For example, Hudson Bay Company trapping

records show that 3,788 grizzly bear hides were shipped from trading posts in the North Cascades region between 1827 and 1859. Grizzly bear numbers probably declined for another century due to intensive killing of bears for the fur trade, and later due to human encroachment resulting from mining and logging activity (Sullivan 1983, Almack et al. 1993). Almack et al. (1993) examined grizzly bear reports and observations submitted between 1950 and 1991; 81 were classified as highly probable correct reports and 20 reports were confirmed. The current population estimate for the Washington NCE is <20 individuals (Gaines et al. 2001). Approximately 6–12 unverified observations are reported to agencies by the public each year (B. Gaines, U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Forest Service, Wenatchee, Washington, USA, personal communication, 2002).

<sup>5</sup>chrismorgan@insightwildlife.com

In 1997, the North Cascades Ecosystem Recovery Plan Chapter was approved by the USFWS (1997). To date, agency recovery efforts in the NCE have included the development of a grizzly bear sighting report process and database, completion of a public attitude survey, adoption of a sanitation plan to minimize negative human–bear interactions in wilderness areas and National Forest campgrounds, and an analysis of habitat quality within core areas (Gaines et al. 2001).

Duda et al. (1996) conducted a public survey of knowledge about grizzly bear recovery and attitudes toward recovery options among residents of the NCE. The majority of respondents supported grizzly bear recovery (64% in the eastern ecosystem, 73% in the western ecosystem). Despite general support for grizzly bear recovery in Washington, segments of the human population in or near the NCE oppose recovery.

The recovery plan recommends ongoing education to provide information about grizzly bears and recovery to the public as part of the recovery process. Since 1992, agency education efforts in the NCE have included public meetings, media outreach, classroom activities, and carnivore workshops for the public (D. Zimmer, USFWS, Olympia, Washington, USA, personal communication, 2002). It has been our observation that previous efforts have been and remain sporadic, underfunded, understaffed, and insufficient to reduce local concerns about grizzly bear recovery. In addition to these agency activities, however, federal and state agencies are now encouraging the project we describe through financial contributions.

Agencies responsible for recovery in the NCE are keen to identify more effective public outreach strategies to overcome widespread misconceptions about grizzlies. The NCE has also received increased attention due to BC government plans to consider augmenting the grizzly bear population adjacent to Washington's NCE. The possibility of bears moving south into Washington has increased the incentive for agencies to promote education in the NCE. The Grizzly Bear Outreach Project began in April 2002 as an extension of past recovery-based education activities in the NCE. We describe our efforts and approach to promote rational dialogue and address common misperceptions about grizzly bears in the NCE.

## Project design

### **Objectives and approach**

The goal of the GBOP is to address public concerns regarding grizzly bears and recovery through dissemination of information through community channels and

individuals. The intent is to promote an atmosphere of non-adversarial dialogue and a process of information exchange among members of the public, project staff, and government agencies. The project is managed independent of recovery activities conducted by government wildlife agencies. Specific project objectives are to:

- (1) gauge the knowledge and opinions of people living, working, and recreating in the NCE with respect to grizzly bear behavior, ecology, and recovery,
- (2) reduce opposition to grizzly bear recovery that is based on incorrect information and unwarranted fears,
- (3) provide opportunities for people who live in or near the recovery area to express their concerns about grizzly bears and recovery,
- (4) provide improved access to accurate information about grizzly bears and the recovery process, and
- (5) educate people to minimize the potential for encounters between grizzly bears and humans that result in human injury or bear mortality.

Information disseminated to communities by the GBOP addresses grizzly bear identification, historical range, ecology and behavior, the grizzly bear recovery process, safety in bear country, assessment and improvement of sanitation to prevent human–bear conflicts, assessment and improvement of alert systems, and livestock loss compensation programs.

### **Components**

**Community assessment interviews.** Prior to implementing the education components, we assessed the knowledge and attitudes of various stakeholder groups. Representatives from these were selected for personal interviews. Stakeholder groups included ranchers, timber industry workers, realtors, media, outfitters, guides, wildlife agency staff, recreationists, orchard owners, owners of recreation businesses, health professionals, teachers, school administrators, and community organization leaders. A non-random sample ( $n = 2-4$ ) of individuals from each stakeholder group were questioned regarding knowledge about grizzly bears diet and physiology, bear attacks, population estimates, opinions regarding recovery (e.g. natural versus augmented), the ecological, social, and heritage role of the grizzly bear, economic consequences of recovery, effective education methods (e.g., presentations, brochures, safety courses, school curricula, community coalition), land use restrictions, and sanitation.

**One-on-one meetings.** We used one-on-one meetings between project staff and community members

to facilitate communication immediately following the community assessment phase. This personal contact provided an opportunity for staff to gain insight about individuals' concerns and to impart factual information about bears. Participants in one-on-one meetings were either selected from the public (participants were approached in public locations by project staff) or chosen because of their position in the community (mayors, County Commissioners, Farm Bureau representatives, Cattlemen's Association representatives, enforcement agents, and other stakeholder groups listed above). Each meeting lasted 30–120 minutes depending on the interest shown by the interviewee. These one-on-one meetings are an ongoing component of our program.

**Community coalition.** In Okanogan County, an organized group of community members was created (we termed them a coalition) to provide a local information source and extend the reach of project staff. Coalition members were required to agree on the need for education, but not necessarily the need for grizzly bear population recovery. The coalition did not promote specific recovery actions (e.g., augmentation of the population, road closings, trail modifications), but provided a mechanism to disseminate information on which members of the public could base opinions and decisions regarding bears and recovery.

Coalition members assist with the development and content of educational materials, identify opportunities for education in the community, distribute brochures, promote attendance at community presentations to friends and colleagues, help identify "Bear Smart" homes and businesses, promote "Bear Smart" communities (sanitation improvements), host kitchen meetings with friends and neighbors, give presentations on grizzly bears and recovery to community groups, and help direct web page content. Some of these efforts are explained below.

**Kitchen meetings.** Small, informal "kitchen" meetings are currently being planned with the assistance of coalition members. The intent of these gatherings is to discuss grizzly bear issues with 4–6 people at a time. Meetings will be hosted by project staff or coalition members and attended by colleagues, friends, neighbors, and family members. We anticipate that informal settings will stimulate open conversation regarding attendees' concerns about grizzly bear issues and knowledge gaps.

**Slide shows.** A modular slide show was created for community groups, youth, ranchers, backcountry recreators, outdoor associations, and clubs. Content of the slide show parallels the brochure (below) and is based on knowledge gaps documented in community assessment interviews and one-on-one meetings.

**Brochure.** GBOP personnel created a durable tri-fold brochure that unfolds to a poster. The poster contains information about sanitation and safety tips for the home, ranch, and campsite, in addition to hiking, horse packing, hunting, fishing, and community.

**Web site.** The project website is designed to facilitate wider public access to information in the brochure. It also facilitates distribution of project announcements, updates, and links to other relevant sites. A feedback form allows the public to submit anonymous questions, concerns, and comments about grizzly bears and the project. A frequently asked questions section is being developed to provide specific information for various audiences (such as hunters, ranchers, hikers).

**Project evaluation.** A sub-project was initiated in September 2003 to evaluate project effectiveness in the northwestern NCE (Whatcom and Skagit counties). A 3-part design is intended to quantify grizzly bear knowledge and attitudes among NCE residents before, during, and after outreach activities over 18 months. The evaluation components include baseline and follow-up telephone surveys with 500 randomly selected NCE residents, quarterly telephone interviews with 12 key informants, and monthly content analysis of local newspapers and government and organization communications. This evaluation is designed to measure changes in awareness regarding bears and recovery activities, as well as level of media coverage devoted to these topics.

## Accomplishments

It is too early to document the success or failure of our efforts. Here we quantify our efforts through the end of February 2003. The 2 small non-government organizations responsible for the design and implementation of the GBOP acquired funding totaling approximately \$45,000 to implement the 11-month pilot project. One third of the funding was contributed by 2 non-government conservation organizations, and the remainder by 5 government agencies.

The pilot project began in April 2002 in Okanogan County (northeastern NCE) with a focus on 9 communities. A salaried local field coordinator hired at  $\frac{3}{4}$  of full time was responsible for implementing project components with the supervision and involvement of 2 project directors (each 25% time, salaried). Pilot project activities halted in February 2003. As of August, 2003 plans were in place to reinstate Okanogan activities and expand to include Whatcom and Skagit counties (northwestern NCE) in September 2003. This expansion requires a second salaried half-time field coordinator.

More than 130 community assessment interviews were conducted in Skagit and Okanogan Counties during summer of 2001 and spring of 2002. Between June 2002 and January 2003, more than 150 one-on-one meetings were conducted with stakeholders in Okanogan County. Most participants in these interviews expressed an interest in having greater access to accurate information. A coalition was established in Okanogan County with 5 initial members from the Okanogan Valley.

Approximately 25 slide presentations were delivered between September 2002 and February 2003 to audiences including the Washington Outfitters and Guides Association, community associations (e.g. Elks, Kiwanis), community colleges, outdoor recreation groups, conservancy organizations, schools, and agency workshops.

Fifty thousand tri-fold brochures were printed in October 2002. Half were distributed as of August, 2003 to outlets including supporters in local communities; schools and youth organizations; churches; tourism business owners (e.g., bed and breakfasts); stores; community visitor centers; National Park, State Park, and Forest Service visitor centers and ranger stations; other agency offices; and at group presentations and community events.

In late September 2002, the project website ([www.bearinfo.org](http://www.bearinfo.org)) went online. By the end of 2002, it had received approximately 5,000 hits. In September 2002 we met with journalists from 5 newspapers around the northeastern NCE. Additional northwest newspapers accessed articles through the Associated Press leading to wider coverage of the project. Approximately 10 articles were published from September to November 2002, focusing on the GBOP in the context of recovery in the North Cascades. We attempted to correct inaccuracies in these articles by submitting letters to the editor. These letters also allowed us to reiterate project objectives and correct common misconceptions.

The total annual projected GBOP budget for the northeastern and northwestern NCE is approximately \$61,000 (excluding the project evaluation process). We strive for a 50:50 ratio of public:private funding.

## Discussion

Many wildlife research, conservation, and management projects lack mechanisms to promote meaningful engagement with the public. Our initial work suggests that the public seeks such engagement. Participant comments also suggest that early communication can help alleviate concerns regarding recovery activities.

This may be especially true when dealing with listed species and the complex biological, social, and political elements that can emerge.

Although our project has just begun, we believe that several factors serve to maximize its likelihood of success. The project is small and focused, offering information on a discrete set of topics. Our messages are simple and consistent across all components. The project is managed independent of government agencies as a neutral effort that is guided by community members. Project staff combines experience in ecology, communication, community organization, and wildlife management. We focus on the importance of open communication between stakeholders, government agencies, and project personnel and take a non-advocacy role, seeking only to provide accurate information in an accessible format.

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