home coming

Grizzly bears have been gone from Washington's North Cascades Ecosystem for half a century. Now there's a plan to bring them home.

BY PAULA MACKAY

"HEY ROB, LOOK!" The words rolled off my tongue like the lyrics of a familiar love song, one I've sung many times in the wilderness over the past 16 years. My husband and I began studying wild carnivores together for his doctoral research in Vermont and have continued to do so since moving to Washington a decade ago. On this late-August morning, we'd been hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail for only a matter of minutes when I saw a blur of movement out of the corner of my eye.

We stopped in the scorching heat to watch a cinnamon-colored black bear scrambling downslope in our direction, a cartoonish cloud of dust in his wake as he stirred up the landscape of parched plants and rock. The bear's shaggy brown body against the desiccated backdrop conjured images from the Gobi Desert, where a few dozen scrappy grizzlies still scratch out a living in one of the harshest places on Earth. Surprisingly, that's a few dozen more grizzlies than survive here in Washington's North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE), despite 6.1 million acres of habitat (and adjoining wildlands in British Columbia) that long served as their home. The US portion of the NCE is as big as Vermont but much less tame, with 90 percent of the region protected

PRINCESS LODGES/FLICKR

as state and federal lands, including the North Cascades National Park.

The black bear disappeared into a nearby copse of trees; if we'd arrived seconds later, we would have never known he was there. "So cool," Robert whispered as we prepared to move on. We had a lot of ground to cover in just five days: 45 miles of backpacking to remove four motion-triggered cameras we'd set out last summer to document wolverines over the winter. We knew better than to linger on day one.

Wolverines, like wolves, are slowly coming back to the NCE after being wiped out by trappers, making their way south again from Canada. We'd hoped grizzly bears would do the same, but extensive surveys conducted by us and fellow biologists turned up zero evidence of grizzlies in the North Cascades. These disconcerting results helped prompt the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Park Service to create a long-anticipated Draft Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the NCE, which was published in January 2017.

For those of us rooting for grizzlies, and we are many — in a recent poll, 80% of Washington voters supported grizzly bear restoration — the EIS alone is cause for celebration. A quarter-century ago, scientific experts concluded the NCE could still sustain a healthy grizzly population, rendering this region one of six recovery zones for grizzlies in the lower 48 states (all of the others are in the Rocky Mountains, except for the Selkirk Ecosystem straddling northwestern Idaho and northeastern Washington). In 1997, the FWS finally added a North Cascades chapter to its national Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, ostensibly laying the groundwork for the species' return. But it wasn't until 2014 that the recovery effort finally got legs.

"It took the right people at the right time to push this forward," says Jack Oelfke, Chief of Natural and Cultural Resources at North Cascades National Park. As the park's lead for grizzly bear recovery, Oelfke is one of those people and has played a pivotal role in the EIS process. For him, pursuing grizzly bear recovery is both a personal passion and a professional mandate. "I believe firmly in the mission of the Park Service and public land management for protecting native species, and where they have disappeared, restoring them if it's feasible. I think the North Cascades Ecosystem is one place where we can do that with grizzlies."

A native of rural Minnesota, Oelfke hasn't always been so at ease with grizzly bears. After high school, he began his career working on a trail crew at Glacier National Park, where he unexpectedly found himself camping, eating and living among the largest carnivores in the contiguous US. That took some getting used to, but after 10 years at Glacier, grizzlies were in his blood, and he'd learned from experience they could make good neighbors.

Neighborliness has been key to the recovery of grizzly bears in the Rockies, where a gradual turnaround in human tolerance helped reverse the species' path toward regional extinction. The grizzly population in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has grown from a precarious 136 animals in 1975 to more than 650 individuals at present, with an additional 800 or so grizzlies currently inhabiting northwestern Montana. Oelfke is optimistic that the willingness of most people to get along with grizzlies in the Rocky Mountains can serve as a model for Washingtonians: "If it works there, why can't it work here?"

"Those who have packed far up into grizzly country know that the presence of even one grizzly on the land elevates the mountains, deepens the canyons, chills the winds, brightens the stars, darkens the forest, and quickens the pulse of all who enter it. They know that when a bear dies, something sacred in every living thing interconnected with that realm…also dies." – JOHN MURRAY

ROCKY HISTORY

IN SEPTEMBER 1967, the year before North Cascades National Park became a park, another adventurous couple packed into the North Cascades backcountry Robert and I relish today. Local miner Rocky Wilson and his wife, Lenora, set out to hunt deer in the rugged mountain high country. One evening, while they were camped in Fisher Basin (one of their favorite wild places and mine), a surprise visitor interrupted their solitude. Ranger-historian Jim Harris picks up the tale from here in his book, *Impressions of the North Cascades*: "During twilight hours, a large bear came down to the creek close by camp. Rocky lifted his old rifle and got off a good shot. While he knew it was a big 'un, he didn't see it had a shoulder hump and frosted coat until he got to the kill."

The details of this event have eroded with time, but Rocky Wilson is widely credited with killing the last known grizzly bear of his era in the North Cascades. Wilson couldn't have known, of course, that the pull of his trigger would mark the end of a more than century-long assault on grizzlies in the Pacific Northwest, whose ancestors had come across the Bering Land Bridge tens of thousands of years earlier. Somehow I doubt Wilson would have wanted this to be his legacy.

Nor would Lewis and Clark have imagined in 1804, when they embarked on their renowned cross-country expedition, that the 50,000 or more grizzly bears roaming the alpine meadows, river valleys, and vast prairies stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Great Plains would be virtual ghosts 100 years later. In 1805, Captain Clark famously wrote in his journal: "These bears, being so hard to die, rather intimidate us all. I must confess that I do not like the gentlemen and had rather fight two Indians than one bear." As things turned out, grizzlies weren't so hard to die after all — neither at the hands of Lewis and Clark nor the fur traders who followed.

Between 1827 and 1859, the Hudson's Bay Company shipped 3,788 grizzly bear hides from three trading posts in the North Cascades alone, although some hides were acquired from other parts of the region. After the trappers, came prospectors and then sheepherders, who eradicated grizzlies throughout the West with substantial help from the government. By the early 1900s, there were hardly any grizzlies left to kill.

These days, hikers and hunters report grizzly bear sightings in the NCE on a regular basis, but they are probably seeing black bears instead. Many of our black bears are brown in color, and they can be difficult to differentiate from grizzlies from a few hundred meters away. Long claws, short and rounded ears, concave facial profile, and a pronounced hump between the shoulders are the distinguishing characteristics of grizzly bears. The most recent confirmed sighting of a grizzly on the US side of the NCE took place in 1996. Experts originally classified a bear photographed in 2010 in North Cascades National

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Grizzly or Brown Bear?

In North American nomenclature, the term "grizzly bear" refers to inland brown bears, while "brown bear" is reserved for coastal brown bears, which can grow very large from eating salmon. Taxonomically, grizzly bears, *Ursus arctos horribilis*, are considered a subspecies of brown bears, *Ursus arctos*.

LEFT: GREGORY "SLOBIRDR" SMITH/FLICKR. RIGHT: ROBERT LONG

"When all the dangerous cliffs are fenced off, all the trees that might fall on people are cut down, all of the insects that bite have been poisoned … and all of the grizzlies are dead because they are occasionally dangerous, the wilderness will not be made safe. Rather, the safety will have destroyed the wilderness." — R. YORKE EDWARDS

Park as a grizzly, but the decision was muddled when photos of a huge, humpy black bear surfaced from the same place taken at roughly the same time.

Black bears are native to the North Cascades, too, but they don't fill the ecological niche of their brawny distant cousins. Inland grizzlies act as nature's rototillers when they dig up ground squirrels burrowed beneath the soil and as proficient gardeners when they distribute seeds from berries and other vegetation via their scats. Grizzly bears also help regulate populations of the smaller mammals they consume as prey and leave behind nutritious table scraps for ravens and other scavengers. As with so many species, the ecological benefits of grizzlies we know about are no doubt dwarfed by those we've yet to uncover and perhaps never will.

Ideally, grizzlies would repopulate the NCE on their own from the north. The problem is, there aren't enough grizzlies in the Canadian portion of the NCE to recolonize vacant real estate in Washington; biologists in British Columbia have documented only two grizzly bears there in the last decade. Plus, the greater NCE region is geographically isolated from viable populations elsewhere in the US and Canada. Biologists and conservationists therefore generally agree that grizzlies will need to be physically relocated to the NCE if they are to have a chance of reestablishing a breeding population.

SEEING GRIZZLIES

A COUPLE OF HOURS drive south from North Cascades National Park, I watch two grizzly bears scan the water for trout. Their exhibit is decorated with native plants, make-believe boulders, and a manmade stream — a micro-alpine meadow in the middle of Seattle. Brothers Keema and Denali arrived at Woodland Park Zoo as cubs in the mid-1990s and have lived here ever since.

I'm at the zoo to casually observe people's reactions to grizzlies in captivity. The bears' massive bodies are only a frog's leap away from the crowd of children and adults who study them from behind a wall of windows. As I listen to the conversations around me, I'm struck by how strongly humans are both drawn to and repelled by the idea of being near grizzlies.

"Look at those teeth."

"See how big his claws are?"

"They seem so friendly."

"I wouldn't want to meet them in the forest."

"I like the cages that have glass," one little girl says to another. "So they can come up really close without hurting you."

Keema and Denali offer us the unique chance to strip away all the scary stories we've heard about grizzly bears and to let their presence penetrate our imaginations. Those who look hard enough see beyond the animals we think we know and catch a glimpse of the bears themselves — their myriad mysteries as well as their physical beauty. For some, however, the stories run too deep.

An astounding 126,000 public comments were submitted in response to the draft EIS, with a detailed summary to be provided in the final document. Jack Oelfke expects the majority of citizens will have endorsed grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades, but emphasizes the EIS process is not a "vote" and that concerns about public safety will likely be one of the greatest challenges to getting grizzlies on the ground.

"Most people react to what they see in the media, about maulings, etc., and that's hard to overcome," says Oelfke. In reality, grizzly attacks are extremely rare in the Rockies and wherever they co-exist with humans; people are much more likely to be killed by lightning, a bee sting, or innumerable other natural or unnatural causes. But statistics pale in the face of a large predator — especially one that has been demonized by US history and the press.

Oelfke's sentiments are echoed by Joe Scott, a veteran grizzly bear advocate with the Washington-based nonprofit, Conservation Northwest. Scott joined the staff of the organization in 1997 in part to work on grizzlies. Now that the draft EIS has been released, his priorities include building community support for the recovery effort in areas abutting the North Cascades.

"The conundrum here is local support, particularly rural local support," says Scott, who worries that misguided fear and fringe politics could poison the well for grizzly bears, which for a small minority of people emblemize philosophical conflicts involving public lands management. At one public meeting hosted by county commissioners in the recovery zone, Scott says he witnessed strategically hand-picked speakers — two of them brought in from out-of-state organizations with a history of opposing public lands and endangered species protections — pepper a panel of agency representatives with divisive questions they weren't given any opportunity to answer.

For better or for worse, Washingtonians will have many years to embrace the idea of sharing the land with grizzly bears again. The EIS lays out several options for restoring grizzlies to the NCE, ranging from maintaining the status quo (i.e., "No Action") to an "Expedited Restoration" expected to reach the stated goal of 200 grizzly bears within 25 years. Most people I know favor a more moderate approach — an "Incremental Restoration" that would require closer to a century to achieve a self-sustaining population of 200 grizzly bears.

GREGORY "SLOBIRDR" SMITH/FLICKR

Both Oelfke and Scott are careful to point out that a successful reintroduction warrants an extensive planning horizon, especially for an emotionally loaded species like grizzly bears. As Scott puts it, the goal of the EIS is to reestablish reproductive capacity for grizzlies in the Cascades — nobody is talking about trucking 200 grizzly bears down from Canada tomorrow. Beyond the challenges of social tolerance and science-informed planning, there is the difficult task of capturing young grizzlies from British Columbia or northwestern Montana and relocating them to Washington. "We're a long way from recovery," says Scott. "A very, very long way."

Exactly how long, nobody knows. The FWS was originally scheduled to release the final version of the EIS in early 2018, but the timing is uncertain given the current political climate. Meanwhile, there's plenty of work to do to make sure grizzlies receive a warm welcome when they do return to the North Cascades. Says Oelfke: "Even if this gets delayed at some point, my hope is that there's great value in doing as much as we can to put this out there as something to pursue."

From my perspective, grizzlies are well worth the wait. When I look out from a peak in North Cascades National Park, I am privy to the secret haunts of animals I hardly ever see but whose existence is the very essence of wildness. The photos Robert and I retrieved from our cameras last August revealed visits from wolverines, Canada lynx, cougars — even a rare wolf with green fire eyes. Only one large carnivore was notably missing from our data: the North Cascades grizzly bear. I'm inspired to know the grizzly's tragic story could have a different ending within my lifetime. WH