

**British Columbia North Cascades
Grizzly Bear Project**

Final Report

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Conservation Partnership Center

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Introduction and Background

Grizzly bears have been designated as “At Risk” by the British Columbia (BC) Ministry for the Environment. Estimates of the overall grizzly bear population in BC vary, but it is clear that the population in the North Cascades management unit has declined precipitously over the past 200 years. Today, the estimated population in BC’s North Cascades is only 15 to 20 grizzly bears. The BC Ministry for the Environment has been supporting grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades through habitat conservation, prohibitions on hunting, and public education.

At the time of initial funding of the BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project, the BC Ministry for the Environment was preparing to augment the grizzly bear population in the BC North Cascades. Release sites within the North Cascades had been identified and candidate bears for capture and release had been located in the Wells Gray area of BC. The candidate grizzly bears were collared and were being tracked to determine whether they would be suitable for capture and release in the North Cascades.

At that point, SEEC recognized the need for a more comprehensive outreach/education program to address grizzly bear ecology, the grizzly bear recovery process, human safety, and sanitation in the backcountry and areas populated by humans. The Grizzly Bear Outreach Project (GBOP) has served as a model public outreach/education program in Washington State. Jim Davis (President of the Conservation Partnership Center and BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project Director), was Co-Director of the GBOP in Washington State. SEEC funded the Conservation Partnership Center to establish a similar program to support grizzly bear recovery in the BC North Cascades.

Unfortunately, shortly after the project was funded, the BC Minister for the Environment, Barry Penner, put a hold on the augmentation plan. The reason for the hold has never been fully explained. The context for the SEEC funded project changed slightly at that point, with less emphasis on preparing the general human population for living with an increased grizzly bear population and slightly more emphasis on outreach to groups and individuals that might have unwarranted fears of or concerns about grizzly bear recovery.

Much of the opposition to grizzly bear recovery is based on an unrealistic perception of the risks associated with grizzly bear recovery. Some residents of the BC North Cascades fear the bears. Others fear government regulations that they believe may come along with grizzly bear recovery. In this revised context, project outreach/education activities were focused primarily on helping local residents gain a better appreciation of the true risks associated with grizzly bear recovery in the BC North Cascades and learning to live with these minimal risks.

Risk communication research shows that situations are seen as more risky if they are perceived as unfamiliar, uncontrollable, and/or unfair. The BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project addressed distorted risk perceptions by providing extensive opportunities for local residents to discuss and learn more about grizzly bear recovery (i.e., more familiar), by providing bear smart information on how local residents could live safely with grizzly bears (i.e., more controllable), and by explaining that local residents would have a voice in how grizzly bear recovery would move forward in the BC North Cascades (i.e., more fair).

Although we have no quantitative measure of the success of these strategies, several sections below present anecdotal evidence that this approach to outreach/education has had a major impact on support for grizzly bear recovery in the BC North Cascades.

Summary of Progress in Year One of the Project

The project started quickly with formation of a steering committee comprised of individuals from North Cascades communities (including elected officials, agency representatives, First Nations representatives, and others). Shortly after that, Brad Hope, Project Field Coordinator, was hired and outreach/education activities were begun. Highlights of the first year included production and distribution of a project brochure, creation of a project PowerPoint presentation, development of working relationships with multiple other organizations and individuals (e.g., First Nations, conservation groups, bear smart programs, fish and game clubs, local conservation offices, Hope Mountain School, and others), meetings with BC Ministry for the Environment leadership and staff, and multiple one-on-one meetings, group meetings, and presentations in local communities.

Summary of Progress in Year Two of the Project

Community Meetings, Presentations, Events, and Media Coverage

The project Field Coordinator was busy throughout most of Year Two of the project meeting with community members, representatives of local groups, and the full groups. Grizzly bears and grizzly bear recovery were always the primary topic of these meetings. A dozen one-on-one meetings were held with elected officials, ranchers, and representatives from the backcountry horsemen, fish and game clubs, conservation groups, First Nations, conservation agencies, school, and the media.

More than two dozen group meetings were held (i.e., special meetings focused specifically on grizzly bear recovery or participation in regularly scheduled group meetings with grizzly bear recovery as a major agenda item). All of these meetings included information on grizzly bears and grizzly bear recovery (i.e., more familiar), how to live safely with grizzly bears (i.e., more controllable), and how the BC Ministry for the Environment would work with local residents to recover grizzly bears (i.e., more fair).

Eight PowerPoint presentations were made to these and other groups (i.e., school classes and Manning Park campers). These presentations were usually followed by extensive discussion sessions when participants could bring up specific concerns about grizzly bear recovery or express their support or opposition to grizzly bear recovery. The meetings and presentations often led to a more formal working relationship between the group and the project (see below).

Two major grizzly bear recovery events were held during the second year of the project. Both were focused on Chilliwack Bruins' hockey games. Project staff provided information and brochures through a popular booth, entertained the whole audience with key facts about grizzly bears during breaks, and engaged Minister Barry Penner in recognition of the BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project.

The hockey games and other communications provided opportunities for three media articles on the grizzly bear recovery and BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project. These articles educated thousands of readers on the precipitous decline in the North Cascades grizzly bear population, the activities that the BC Ministry for the Environmental was undertaking to support recovery, and the important role of the BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project in reaching out to local residents with important information about grizzly bears and grizzly bear recovery.

Preliminary Bear Smart Assessments

Preliminary Bear Smart Assessments were completed in Manning Park, Eastgate, and Tulameen. The three assessments examined natural, community, and behavioral characteristics that determine whether bear/human conflicts are likely to occur. Natural variables include terrain, bear travel corridors, and natural vegetation. Community variables include land use, human population, economy, garbage management system, and human pedestrian corridors (i.e., trails). Behavioral variables include garbage management, bird feeder placement, and many others.

All three communities are fully surrounded by forested grizzly bear recovery area with natural bear travel corridors and abundant natural bear foods. Although the communities are small, all experience significant increases in population during the late spring, summer, and/or fall when part-time residents and visitors are present. The economies of the communities are primarily oriented toward recreation, with many trails, campsites, and other opportunities for human/bear encounters. Most trails and campsites have good visibility that prevents unexpected encounters.

In general, garbage management systems and/or garbage management behaviors are adequate to prevent problems with bears. However, numerous bird feeders, humming bird feeders, bar-b-que grills, and outdoor ice chests could be problematic. Education is needed to assure that permanent and part-time residents, as well as visitors, are aware of the need to limit the availability of non-natural sources of food for bears in and around their community.

There was very little sign of bear presence in the three communities. Permanent residents in each community reported that encounters with bears are rare and usually not threatening. Nearly all people that we encountered had a positive attitude toward bears and the human behaviors that are needed to prevent problems. With increased education and attention to the availability of non-natural bear foods, these communities could become models for how to live safely in bear country. All three communities have high potential for designation as Bear Smart Communities.

Relationship Building

The relationships that were established during the project are probably the most important achievement. First Nations on both the east and west sides are very interested in pursuing oral histories of their relationship with grizzly bears. Through numerous meetings and presentations, the foundation has been laid for significant future work on this issue with the First Nations in the North Cascades. Following repeated meetings and presentations, several fish and game clubs and backcountry horsemen groups have exhibited a much more positive attitude toward grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades. This will provide future channels for education, as well as opportunities for bringing a diverse array of citizens together to help manage the grizzly bear recovery process in the BC North Cascades.

Partnerships were also established with the Hope Mountain School and the Chilliwack Bruins hockey team. Both relationships provide access to segments of the community (i.e., schools and sports fans) that are important for future outreach/education efforts. Initial conversations with the BC Ministry for Tourism may also provide an opportunity for emphasizing the positive aspects of grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades. And last, but not least, the BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project steering committee has been effective at identifying opportunities and moving them forward. This group will continue to be available for outreach/education.

Current Status of Grizzly Bear Recovery in the British Columbia North Cascades

As indicated above, grizzly bear recovery in the BC North Cascades has been put on hold by the BC Minister for the Environment. However, there appears to be substantial support for and only minimal opposition to grizzly bear recovery in this area of British Columbia. Some BC North Cascades residents are expressing concern about the limited genetic base of their grizzly bear population and what impact this might have on survival of the population. Others are inquiring about why the critically important augmentation program has been put on hold.

First Nations recognize the importance of grizzly bears to their history and culture. Fish and game clubs and other perceived traditional opponents of grizzly bear recovery are coming to recognize the benefits associated with grizzly bear presence in the North Cascades (i.e., habitat protection, wildlife viewing, and reduced commercial development). Elected officials and tourism agency representatives struggling with economic problems are beginning to see that wildlife related tourism, especially focused on mega fauna, could be a major economic benefit.

Residents and frequent visitors to the North Cascades have learned more about living safely with grizzly bears and are not as concerned as before. Ranchers have come to recognize the very slow reproductive rate of grizzly bears and limited threat they pose to livestock. Schools and sports teams are now taking an interest in protecting their dwindling grizzly bear population. Media articles are positive about protection of the small grizzly bear population in the North Cascades.

It is now possible to move forward more aggressively on grizzly bear recovery in the BC North Cascades. With very limited increases in education about grizzly bears and a comprehensive process for citizen participation, local communities are ready to support the augmentation plan that has been put on hold by the BC Minister for the Environment.

Recommendations to SEEC for Further Action

- Provide additional funding for bear smart education in BC North Cascades communities that will move bear smart behaviors from “good” to “excellent.”
- Work with First Nations to document grizzly bear oral histories and share them with the broader North Cascades and southern BC populations.
- Continue coordination with the Chilliwack Bruins hockey team and the media to further educate populations that normally do not encounter grizzly bear recovery information.
- Continue collaboration between the BC North Cascades Grizzly Bear Project and Hope Mountain School that focuses on educating youth and their families about grizzly bears.
- Support a study on the feasibility of using grizzly bears as an icon for increased tourism and economic benefit in the BC North Cascades.
- Support and widely disseminate the results of a study on the genetic viability of the BC North Cascades grizzly bear population without augmentation.
- Create short term and long term opportunities for local residents to express their opinions on whether and how the grizzly bear population in the North Cascades should be recovered.
- Provide technical and financial support to the BC Ministry for the Environment to move forward on the originally planned grizzly bear augmentation program.