

The Free Bears (The BP Magazine, January 2001)

Powerful and hump-backed, grizzly bears are true symbols of the wilderness, ruling the remote mountain and foothills regions of northwestern North America. Their dominance in the wild world is undisputed. Outside that world, however, their position is not as secure.

Locals and tourists in the postcard-perfect mountain village of Lake Louise, Alberta, in Western Canada, ran for safety when a chocolate brown-colored grizzly bear ambled through a crowded shopping mall in the middle of a hot summer afternoon in 1996. Diners happily eating cream cheese bagels and mineral water reacted with horror as the 170-kg (350-pound) male grizzly poked its dish-shaped face through an open door of a popular delicatessen. The bear calmly peered around before padding away and disappearing into the nearby forest.

For Parks Canada officials charged with protecting people and wildlife in Banff National Park, that was the last straw for the bear they knew as Number 16. Unwittingly, the grizzly had become a symbol of the growing struggle to maintain healthy populations of wildlife, including bears, in the face of habitat-eroding development in Western Canada.

The six-year-old grizzly had earned a reputation as a public nuisance prior to the deli visit. It had frequented local roads and highways, including the busy Trans-Canada Highway, a concrete thread that traverses Canada east to west. It had been at the center of many so-called “bear jams.” These unscheduled events involve several cars and trucks that suddenly stop alongside a bruin feeding or walking beside the highway, spilling out camera-toting tourists who approach dangerously – and foolishly – close until wardens arrive to shoo them back to their vehicles.

Once, the grizzly wandered through a campground in Lake Louise, stepping on a tent occupied by a shocked tourist. Investigating park wardens believed the grizzly accidentally tripped on a nylon guy rope holding up the tent. The bear hadn’t attempted to enter the shelter and the camper was not harmed. Nevertheless, park officials grew increasingly concerned about No. 16.

The bear had been given the identification number by researchers with the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project. They are carrying out study work to determine how to maintain a healthy grizzly population into the future through a better understanding of the bears’ needs. When Number 16 was first captured at the age of three, it was fitted with a radio collar, allowing researchers to track its travels with sophisticated telemetry equipment. They became increasingly concerned when the bear showed no fear of people and developed areas.

“He got on the slippery slope of being habituated to humans,” notes Mike Gibeau, principal researcher with the grizzly bear study. Wardens had tried various techniques to convince No. 16 that being around people meant trouble. In an attempt to force it to remote, unpopulated areas of the park, it had been shot with rubber bullets and a water cannon. Wardens and researchers captured the grizzly, and then moved it to the remote backcountry several kilometers from Lake Louise. The bear returned within days.

After the deli incident, No. 16 was live-trapped and sentenced to a life of captivity at the Calgary Zoo, almost 200 kilometers (120 miles) east of its home. It was the first

time a so-called “problem” wild bear was sent to the zoo to live. Gibeau calls it the best option under the circumstances. Several years earlier, park wardens simply would have shot No. 16. It wouldn’t have been given a second chance. In those days, many people began fearing that zoos were the only place where the great bears could survive.

The grizzly bear (*Ursus horribilis*) historically roamed the entire western half of North America, including the Great Plains. Now, they cover less than half of their old range. The decline of grizzlies in Canada has been traced to the arrival, in the mid-1800’s, of significant numbers of people of western-European descent. They hunted the bears and pushed them out of their traditional range. Decreasing habitat and human-caused mortality has continued, causing grizzlies to be classified a vulnerable species in Canada.

They are found in parts of mountain ranges from the coast of British Columbia to the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, in the boreal forest of Alberta’s Swan Hills and in the Yukon and Northwest territories. Grizzlies also live in Alaska and throughout the northwest United States, where they are considered a threatened species. The surviving North American population is estimated at 25,000, half of them in British Columbia.

Alberta, which has blue-listed the bear as an “at risk” species, is home to about 800 grizzlies. Almost one-tenth of them live in Banff National Park, Canada’s oldest national park. With one million people living within a few hours’ drive of the park, it is one of the most developed landscapes in North America where grizzlies still survive.

Resource development, recreation, transportation corridors, and resort and housing development have eroded wilderness – the historical home range of the grizzly. They move and live mainly in valley bottoms, ecologically rich areas also favored by developers, road builders and recreational users. That’s where bears find food they need to survive: plants, roots, berries, animal carcasses and elk and moose calves. The grizzly is considered an “umbrella” species: an indicator of how well wilderness is being managed. If grizzlies are declining, so is the wilderness and all other wildlife species that share it.

“Without grizzlies, the wild is taken out of wilderness,” says noted author Stephen Herrero, a University of Calgary professor and one of the world’s leading authorities on grizzly bears. Herrero says grizzlies have a low degree of demographic resilience: in other words, the ability to maintain populations in the face of habitat loss and increased human-caused mortality. Their physiology contributes to their limited resilience. Female grizzlies are about seven years old before they have their first cubs and they have litters averaging less than two cubs every four years. Their home ranges vary from 200 to 500 square kilometers for females, 1,000 to 2,000 square kilometers for males. These factors, coupled with a low population density – about one bear for every 50 to 100 square kilometers – combine to make grizzlies extremely sensitive to population declines.

Historically, grizzlies have suffered heavy mortality. Researchers with the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project found that, between 1971 and 1996, 639 grizzlies died within the Central Rockies Ecosystem (CRE), which comprises most of the research area. Of those deaths, people – hunting, poaching and highway and railway collisions -- caused 627. Wardens and provincial wildlife officers were forced to destroy some bears that had attacked people. Researchers found that most human-caused bear deaths occurred within 500 meters of a road or facility, or within 200 meters of a trail.

Information gathered by Eastern Slopes researchers has influenced how governments manage the bears and helped shape public policy around development and recreational use in grizzly bear country. Some inroads have been made to protect the great bear, and public awareness has been heightened.

The grizzly has long been a focal point for public debate, often pitting environmental groups against companies operating in bear habitat. The past decade, however, has seen a growing commitment by resource companies to support projects designed to benefit grizzlies. Conservationists and corporations formerly at loggerheads are finding themselves working together for long-term solutions. Herrero credits BP Energy Canada, formerly under Amoco Canada Petroleum Co. Ltd., with being “a leader” in programs supporting the great bear.

The company has supported the Eastern Slopes project since 1994. BP pumps \$10,000 annually into the study and Peter Zimmerman, staff environmentalist with BP Canada, sits on the project’s steering committee. “I hope my kids one day will be able to see a grizzly bear in the wild,” says Zimmerman, an ardent backpacker who has encountered grizzlies – safely, at a distance - while hiking.

As well as the Eastern Slopes project, BP helped develop and provides funding for an educational program called Grizzly Bears Forever! It’s run in conjunction with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), a national conservation organization. BP has committed \$50,000 over two years to the program, designed to teach Calgary-area junior high school students about conservation. Several BP employees have volunteered as teachers.

The company also supports the innovative Yellowhead grizzly conservation strategy, an industry-government collaboration to develop a coordinated management program for grizzlies in west-central Alberta. Zimmerman represents the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, of which BP is a member, on a regional carnivore management group.

Herrero, who has studied grizzlies for more than 30 years, welcomes this cooperative approach. “Everybody is coming to realize the importance of having grizzly bears,” he says.

