



A NEW VISION FOR

**GRIZZLY  
BEAR  
RECOVERY IN  
THE  
NORTHERN  
ROCKY  
MOUNTAINS**



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**[LINK TO KEY SCIENCE PAPERS AND REPORTS](#)**





## A NEW VISION FOR

# GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY

Photo by Sam Parks

A Vision for Grizzly Bear Recovery should be as broad and bold as the respect and honor this iconic, wide-ranging species commands. With hostile wildlife policies on the rise and increasing grizzly bear deaths, now is the time to chart a new course of grizzly bear recovery, management and sustainable coexistence between bears and humans. We envision a future where grizzly bears occupy biologically suitable habitat unimpeded, without the threat of death or displacement so they can thrive for generations to come.

Therefore, we are building upon years of recovery efforts to provide a clear vision for the future of grizzly bears within the Northern Rockies. One with a landscape of historic habitats, including the mountains, plateaus, forests, river valleys and breaks, and prairies that will sustain one solidly unified grizzly bear population as part of a healthy and biologically diverse Northern Rockies Ecosystem. Under this vision, grizzly bears will inhabit and reoccupy this landscape based on natural, unassisted movements.

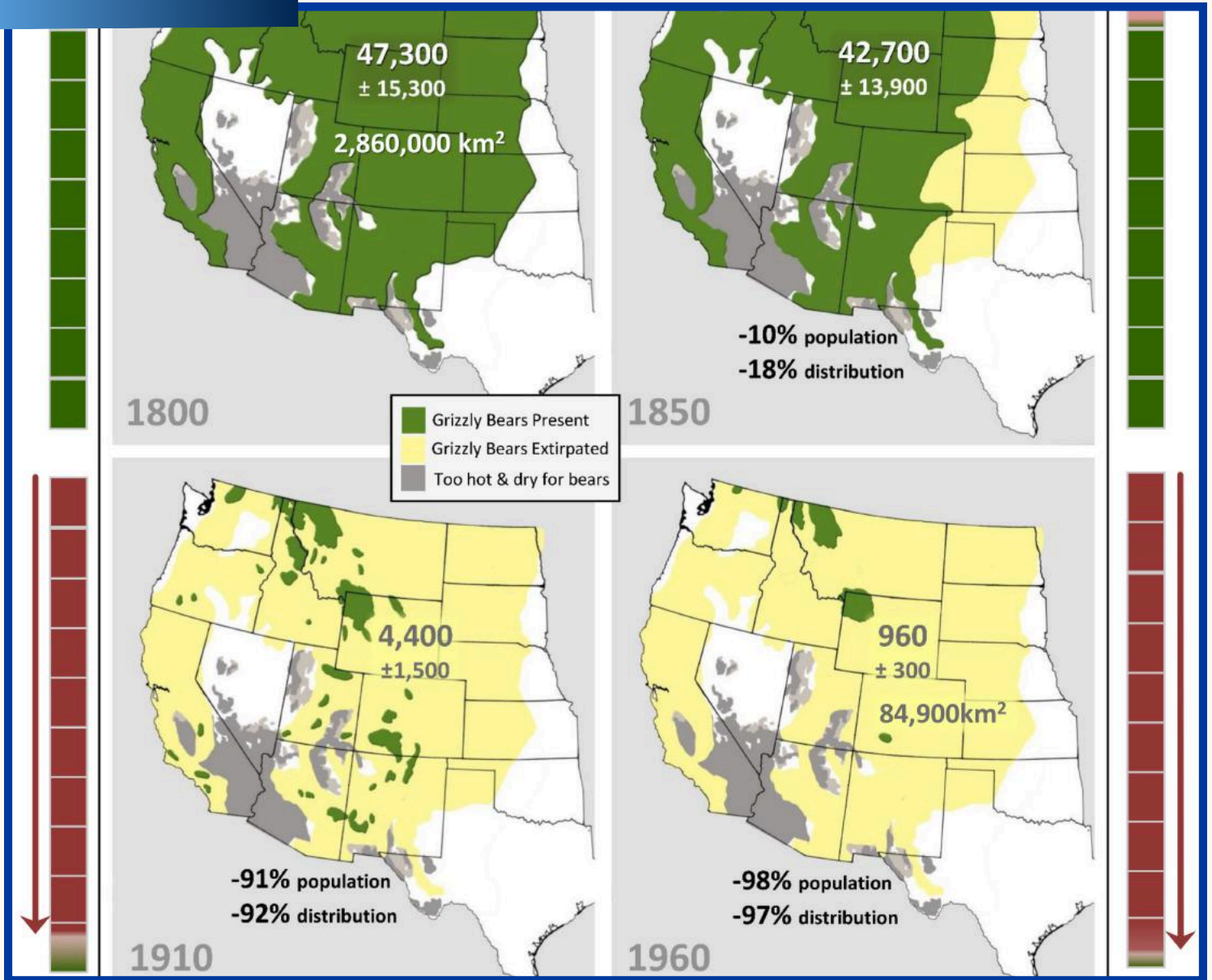
A fundamental principle of our vision is that grizzly bears have an inherent right to exist and thrive in biologically suitable habitat on public lands and private land areas with dedicated conservation easements. We envision sustainable coexistence between bears and humans including in areas dependent on agriculture and on the fringes of urban areas.

**We envision a future where grizzly bears will forever be free from the threat of hunting.**



# EXTIRPATIONS

Map by David Mattson



The grizzly disappeared from much of the American continent in an historic heartbeat, after commanding a place at the top of the food chain from Canada to Mexico, and from the Mississippi River to the California coast, until the arrival of European settlers. Following just three generations of frontiersmen, the Great Bear, which once numbered roughly 50,000, was eliminated from 98% of its former range in the lower-48 states and reduced to about 2% of its former numbers.

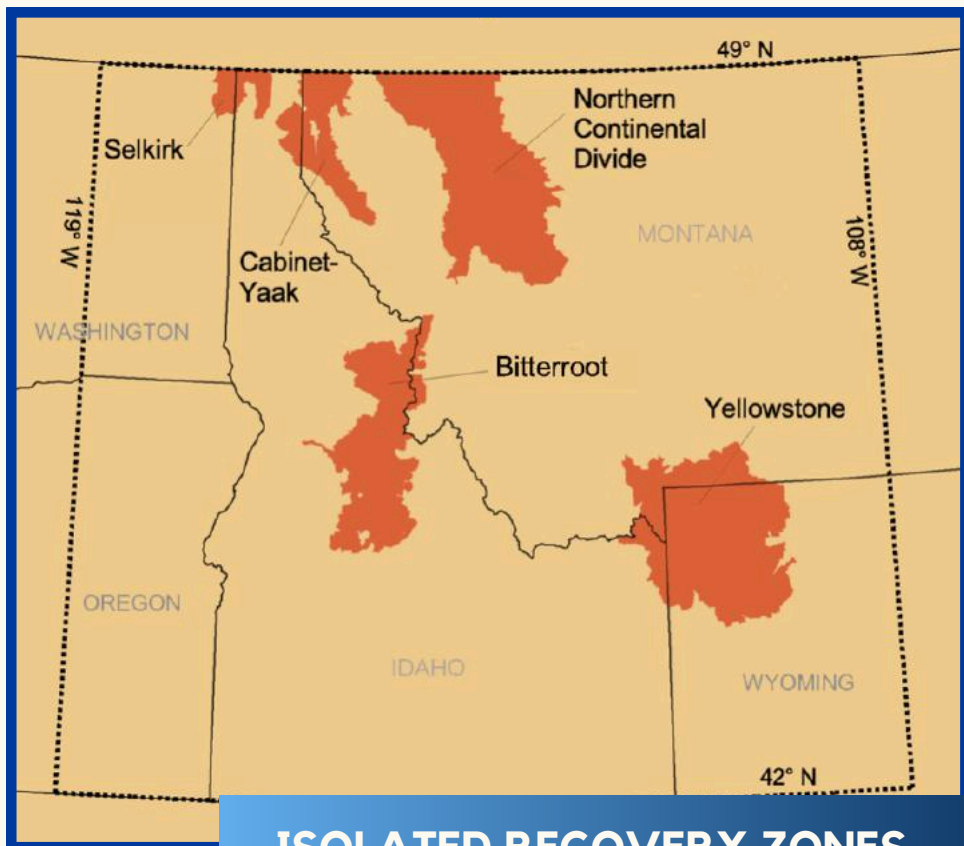
There is still time to restore the threatened grizzly, a critical link to what once was, but only by adopting a broader vision of a bigger connected ecosystem. A vision large enough to account for environmental changes wrought by the climate-crisis, and the continued threats to grizzlies' survival. **We envision a future where people build on past successes and learn from failures in efforts to resolve human-bear conflicts.**

# WHAT IS THREATENING GRIZZLY BEARS?

The world is rapidly changing. Escalating human population growth, rural sprawl, energy development, expanding road construction, and increasing off-road vehicle use continue to degrade grizzly bear habitat and further isolate bear populations. Global climate change is reducing key grizzly bear foods critical for reproductive success and increasing the reliance on human-sourced foods. This results in higher levels of human-caused mortality. Introduced diseases are affecting bears and limiting key bear foods such as whitebark pine seeds, forcing bears to expand their movements to procure the calories needed to survive winter denning and to successfully reproduce.

## THE NUMBERS

Recent research reveals that there is still room on the landscape to reach an interconnected population of 3,000 grizzlies in the Northern Rockies by naturally reconnecting currently isolated populations and allowing grizzlies to naturally recolonize the Bitterroot ecosystem, a critical link to recovery.



## ISOLATED RECOVERY ZONES

Map by Bader 2000

Scientists in the fields of genetics and population viability find that to ensure long-term persistence and evolutionary potential, 2,500-3,000 and as many as 5,000 grizzly bears are needed in a single Northern Rocky Mountain population. There are an estimated 2,200 grizzly bears in the lower 48 states, existing as isolated subpopulations in designated Grizzly Bear Recovery Zones, known as the Greater Yellowstone, Northern Continental Divide, Cabinet-Yaak, Selkirk and Bitterroot.

Connecting the isolated populations into a solidly connected single population of approximately 3,000 bears will promote viability for centuries, not decades. It will recover grizzly bears in the geographically vital Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk ecosystems rather than sacrificing them to continued development. Our vision connects breeding populations and will foster consistent and constant gene flow across the Northern Rockies.

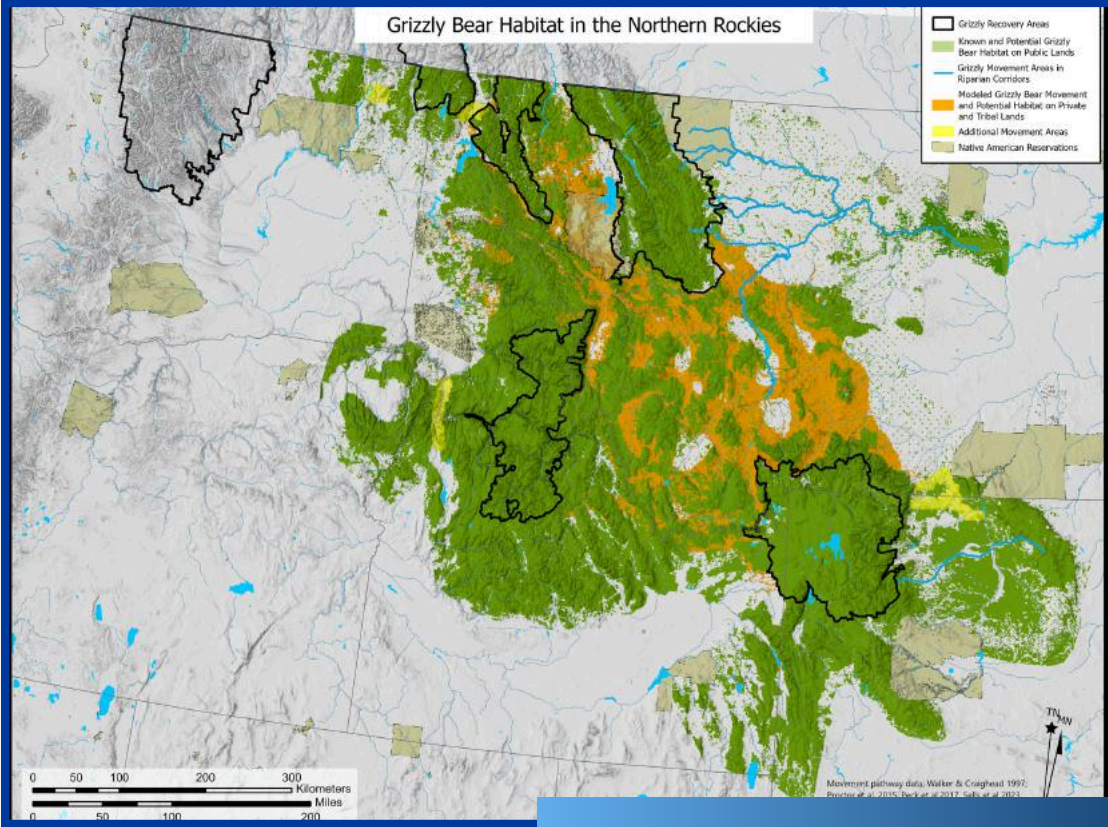
A single large habitat area has advantages over several small ones. A larger area can support a connected population with greater genetic diversity, which is necessary for long-term viability of the species. A single large interconnected habitat also removes the need for repeated expensive, controversial and high-risk human-assisted translocations.

## A RECOVERY AREA THAT PROTECTS OCCUPIED AND SUITABLE HABITATS

None of the government’s designated Grizzly Bear Recovery Zones are large enough to independently support a viable population of grizzly bears. A Northern Rockies population of grizzly bears must link the existing island populations into one large Recovery Area primarily on national public lands. The map below illustrates the potential location of a unified population in the Northern Rockies.

Naturally recovering a minimum population of 3,000 grizzly bears can only be achieved by establishing a connected self-sustaining population of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Mountains, the largest block of roadless wildlands in the Northern Rockies.

Our vision prioritizes non-intrusive research and monitoring methods including game cameras, DNA hair traps and systematic reporting and scientific verification of grizzly bear observations.



## GRIZZLY HABITAT

Map by Sieracki and Bader 2024



# A GUIDE FOR THE VISION: A SINGLE, SOLIDLY CONNECTED POPULATION

Photo by IGBC



## 1. ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS

Reconnecting isolated populations will require specific management actions, new attitudes and policies, and dedicated funding that fully address the cumulative effects of numerous sources of human-caused mortality that are stressing grizzly bear populations and delaying regional recovery. Approximately 85% of all documented grizzly bear mortality is human-related.

***OUR VISION WILL SHIFT THE PRIORITY TO NON-LETHAL METHODS FOR CONFLICT REDUCTION AND MANAGEMENT.***

# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## REDUCE HUNTING, TRAPPING CONFLICTS AND MORTALITIES

Grizzly bear mortalities increase during hunting season, often due to misidentification or surprise encounters when people react with deadly force rather than utilizing bear spray. Our vision would require hunters and users of public lands in grizzly habitat to carry bear spray, have it accessible, and know how to use it. Hunters will also complete a mandatory bear identification course to obtain a license.

There is currently an unacceptable level of grizzly bear mortality due to surprise encounters with people who are not carrying bear spray and those who refuse to secure food and garbage. We support expanding Bear Smart, Bear Aware and Bear Wise programs that promote coexistence strategies.

We advocate for an end to spring black bear hunting. This will reduce mistaken identity killing of grizzly bears, particularly female grizzlies with cubs. State wildlife management will be improved by modifying trapping regulations to prevent bycatch of grizzly bears, ending baiting of black bears, and ending hunting black bears with hounds.



### DO YOU KNOW YOUR BEARS?

<b>Grizzly Bear</b>	 <p>Front toes form a straighter line</p>	<b>Black Bear</b>	 <p>Front toes form an arched line</p>
Smaller, round ears	Shoulder hump	Pointed, tall ears	No shoulder hump
			
Dished face profile	Long, 2-4" claws	Straight face profile	Short, 1.5" claws

Do not rely on size or color to make an identification. Size can vary and colors can range from black to blonde for both species.

Learn how to be bear aware: <https://igbconline.org/be-bear-aware/>



# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## PERMANENTLY PROTECT GRIZZLIES FROM HUNTING

Long-term protections must be adopted that prohibit grizzly bear hunting. Grizzly bear hunting is an additive, unsustainable and unnecessary source of mortality. Failure to enact and enforce a policy prohibiting hunting would further pose unacceptable risks to the most valuable and vulnerable demographics, especially since it is nearly impossible for hunters to identify the sex or age of their targets. Proposed post delisting hunting seasons in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming would lower the effective population size threatening the long-term viability of a unified Northern Rockies population.

State management plans, effective upon delisting, will allow hunting of grizzlies outside of core habitat areas that could fragment populations and limit genetic exchange between subpopulations. It also allows baiting of grizzlies in two hunting units, which undermines efforts to prevent the bears from seeking out human food sources. Once conditioned, grizzly bears frequently come into conflict with people and then are subject to lethal removal.

**"The mountains have always been here, and in them, the bears."**

Rick Bass, *The Lost Grizzlies*



# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## REDUCE HIGHWAY AND RAIL-LINE COLLISIONS

Each year grizzly bears die on highways, interstates and rail lines. We envision reducing collision mortalities with highway vehicles by creating a network of crossing structures that allow safe passage and responsible rail transportation systems that clean up grain spills along tracks and equip trains with devices such as noise-makers to deter bear presence.

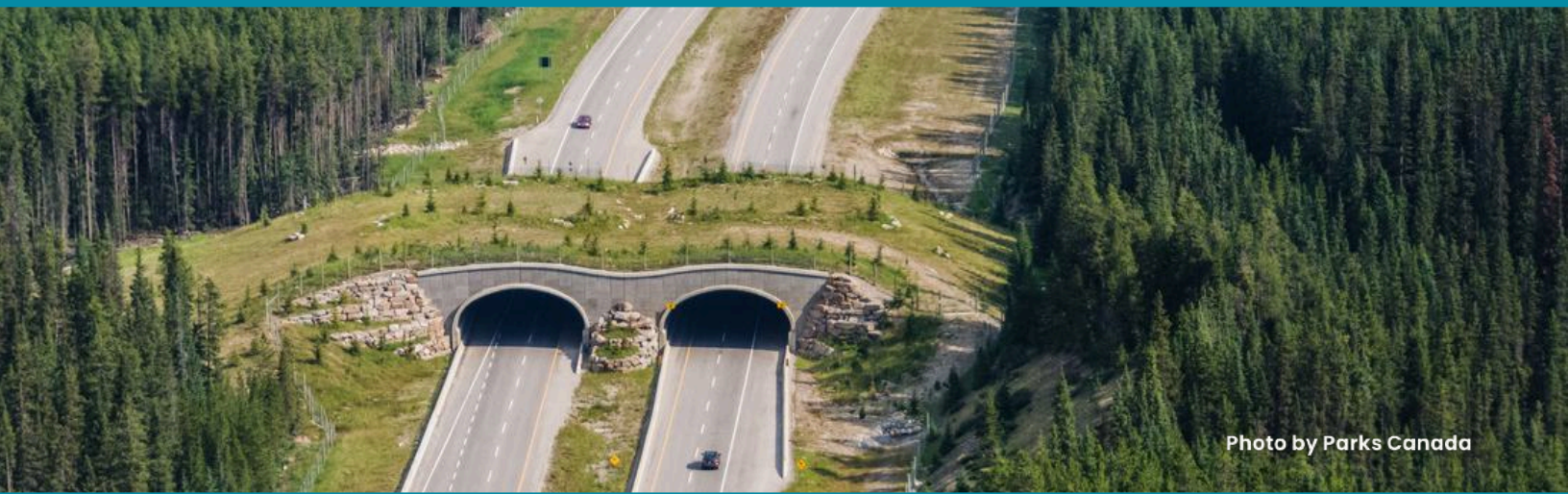


Photo by Parks Canada

## INCREASED BUDGETS FOR ENFORCEMENT

Our vision includes increased budgets for patrolling and enforcement. Poaching and malicious killings of grizzly bears are a constant threat to their recovery. Bears are also caught and killed or maimed in traps and snares set for wolves, coyotes and furbearers. Very few of these killings are reported or detected.

Driving the ongoing high levels of grizzly mortality and loss of habitat is a failure to fully implement existing laws and policies. Additionally, politicization of grizzly bear management by elected officials and some government bureaucrats continues to hinder support for recovery, and funding for law enforcement and monitoring.

# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## IMPROVE SANITATION

Human-related foods including garbage, chickens, bird feeders, and pet foods attract grizzly bears and create bears habituated to easy human sourced foods and human presence. These bears are frequently killed by wildlife managers. A fed bear is a dead bear. In fact, grizzlies attracted to chickens account for a large percentage of management mortalities. Our vision includes regulating chicken farming by mandating electric fencing.

Other vital actions include implementing food storage orders in all public land campgrounds, picnic areas, fishing access sites, and private campgrounds. We also call for developing consistent backcountry bear-resistant sanitation measures and enforce them.



Communities must adopt food and garbage storage ordinances like those enacted in Missoula and Potomac, Montana that require bear resistant containers throughout grizzly bear country.

Government agencies must hire several full-time employees to work with the public on sanitation issues and education. All sanitation efforts should be coupled with outreach, monitoring, and maintenance of infrastructure as well as cross jurisdictional enforcement measures coordinated with federal, state and local governments. Relevant agencies should encourage and assist in the establishment of local citizen working groups to develop comprehensive conflict mitigation strategies.



# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## IMPROVE LIVESTOCK AND RANGE MANAGEMENT

Direct lethal conflicts with grizzly bears occur on public land grazing allotments and on private lands. Without federal protections, the State of Montana Grizzly Bear Management Plan would allow ranchers to kill grizzly bears who are “threatening” their livestock. Additionally, Wyoming must change its untenable, permissive policies on lethal removal of habituated bears that have become reliant on human food sources resulting in conflicts. The state's focus on maintaining minimum population numbers within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, rather than promoting range expansion and connectivity with other recovery zones, will impede the broader recovery of grizzlies across their historical range in the Northern Rockies.

To reduce conflicts and promote coexistence, this vision promotes cancelling and permanently terminating expiring grazing authorizations (permits and leases) in grizzly habitat, and buying out willing sellers and terminating those permits. We promote the use of range riders and carcass removal programs. Grain bins, beehives and livestock, including chickens, should be protected by electric fencing.



Photo by Sam Parks

# ADOPT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS HUMAN CONFLICTS:

## RECREATION

The human population in the Northern Rockies is growing rapidly, particularly in areas adjacent to and between grizzly bear recovery zones. Additionally, visitation to this region has increased significantly. This growth poses serious challenges for maintaining a viable, connected grizzly bear population due to rising demands for housing, recreational activities, and associated amenities. Mountain biking in particular, due to the speed of encounters, has become a high-conflict activity in grizzly bear habitats.

To address these issues, the Montana Governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council made recommendations for managing recreational activities, which should be fully implemented. This includes establishing objective monitoring and assessment methods to evaluate successes, failures, and the effectiveness of adaptive strategies aimed at protecting grizzly bears. A recreational carrying capacity analysis and enforcement of allocation limits for public lands in the Northern Rockies is also essential.



Photo by IGBC



## 2. IMPROVE AND PROTECT GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT:

### MAINTAIN THE WILD CHARACTER OF GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT AND CAREFULLY MANAGE ROADS AND ACCESS

We envision the maintenance of all currently secure grizzly bear habitat, and expanding those areas based on scientific data. Roadless areas are of primary importance as they form the core of demographic connectivity and should be fully preserved.

Designated Wilderness areas and the large national parks are the strongholds for grizzly bear populations in the Northern Rockies. They provide secure habitat and isolation from harassment and displacement. Our vision promotes safeguards that ensure the great bear can thrive in these wild places, protected from intentional and unintentional harm, and where they can live out their lives without the trammeling impacts of humans.



Photo by Bob Clark



# IMPROVE AND PROTECT GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT:

## PROVIDE FOR CONNECTIVITY AND HABITAT SECURITY

Reestablishing a single cross-border population of 5,000 grizzly bears or more will require a comprehensive effort to increase connectivity across the Highway 3 corridor in British Columbia and Alberta. This area has been identified as a high fracture zone.

Reducing motorized disturbance is also essential for grizzly bear connectivity.



## MANAGEMENT PLANS MUST IMPROVE HABITAT SECURITY

Our vision applies science-based road management, including road removal to achieve increased habitat security in areas with important bear foods, and in areas of connectivity.

Our vision supports development and implementation of management standards for roads, motorized recreation, and other issues impacting grizzly bear recovery that are driven by science, not by agency policies that prioritize recreation and resource extraction. These include limits on Open Motorized Route Density, retention of vegetative cover, and increased enforcement to prevent illegal activity on forest roads and trails. It also factors in the predictable impacts of climate change on key natural grizzly bear food sources and the ever increasing human footprint on the landscape.



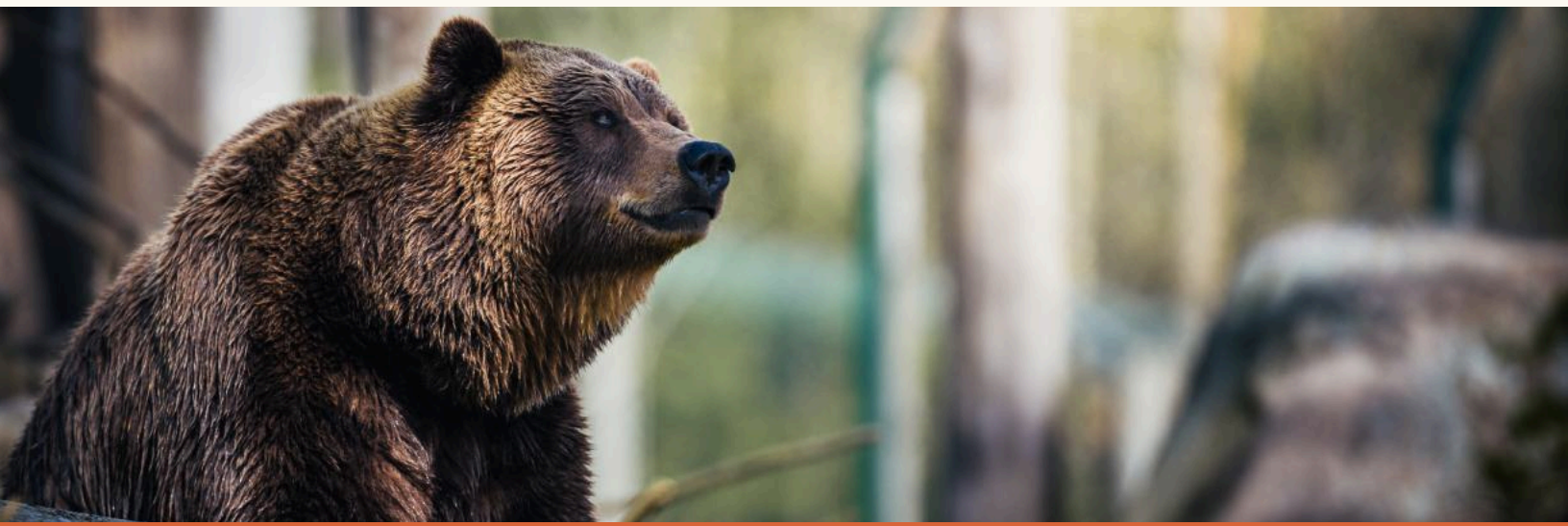
Photo by IGBC

### **3. PROMOTE STEWARDSHIP AND PROTECTION OF PRIVATE LANDS**

A significant portion of suitable grizzly bear habitat is found on private lands. These areas are crucial for the recovery of a single Northern Rockies grizzly bear population. However, residential development within these habitats has surged, resulting in the loss of many vital areas. Counties and municipalities need strong zoning policies that ensure development does not impede grizzly bear connectivity. These policies should also include requirements to help prevent bears from being drawn into conflicts, such as infrastructure that keeps attractants like garbage containers away from bears.

Conservation easements can also help reduce the threats of subdivision, the construction of permanent roads, clearcutting, and other harmful activities. We envision robust state and federal funding mechanisms that support local grizzly-smart zoning and incentives for conservation easements.





## 4. FIX INADEQUATE GOVERNANCE

Our Vision reforms governance mechanisms by strengthening oversight through Section 7 consultation and biological opinions as required under the Endangered Species Act.

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee is a quasi-government entity with no statutory authority. Yet, it acts to preserve the government monopoly over science and management, and lack of open data sharing. It protects the agendas of individual agencies rather than taking a broader view of the needs for true grizzly bear recovery in the Northern Rockies. We will increase the role of independent science and the IGBC would assume the advisory role that was intended when it was created.

We envision increased oversight and transparency of any requests from state agencies for killing bears, and policies that ensure lethal removal is a last resort.

Far too frequently, grizzly bears are killed by state and federal agencies. Management killing accounts for the largest percentage of grizzly mortality. While federally protected, state agencies must obtain approval from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to kill grizzlies. This approval has been granted with increased frequency in recent years. Wildlife Services also assists in killing grizzlies in conflict with livestock on our public lands.





## **5. ADAPT WITH CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Climate change is causing significant changes in the distribution and abundance of key foods for grizzly bears. Climate change is also reducing denning seasons, and exposing bears to conflicts with humans over a longer period of time.**

**A unified Northern Rockies Recovery Area will ensure grizzly bears can adapt to the predictable impacts of climate change, including shifting food sources and the ever increasing human footprint on the landscape.**

A young brown bear cub is the central focus of the image, standing amidst a nest of dry sticks and twigs. The cub is looking towards the right of the frame. The background is a soft-focus natural setting with green foliage and brown branches. A white rectangular box with the word 'CONCLUSION' in bold blue letters is overlaid on the left side of the image. In the bottom right corner of the image, there is a small credit: 'Photo by IGBC/Janklow'.

## CONCLUSION

Photo by IGBC/Janklow

Implementing this vision will require harnessing collective knowledge, including from Native Americans, a willingness to learn, and adapting management strategies. It also requires fostering open communication and relationships among citizens, conservationists, and Tribal, state, and national governments. This is essential to achieve what no one can accomplish alone: creating a safe and sustainable future for both the bears and the communities that share their ecosystems.

To succeed, we must re-engage with a public that is increasingly wary of government initiatives and regulations related to bear management. Additionally, it is important to think and act in both short- and long-term time frames, as well as at multiple scales. Therefore, working on small-scale community sanitation projects is just as important as large-scale habitat restoration efforts across the U.S.-Canada border.

Perhaps most importantly, our vision relies on a sense of humility, recognizing that there is much we still do not know.

The window of opportunity is closing fast on our remaining grizzlies. But the practical steps outlined here are well within our reach, good for the bear, the region's economy, and the future of wildness in the West. We must seize the moment and ensure that grizzly bears thrive in the lower 48 states, future generations will thank us.





# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO ACHIEVING A SINGLE, SOLIDLY CONNECTED POPULATION

## Adopt Policies and Practices to Address Human Conflicts

- Reduce hunting, trapping conflicts and mortalities
- Permanently protect grizzlies from hunting
- Reduce highway and rail-line collisions
- Increase Budgets for Enforcement
- Improve Sanitation
- Improve Livestock and Range Management
- Address Recreation Conflicts

## Improve and Protect Grizzly Bear Habitat

- Maintaining the wild character of grizzly bear habitat where possible and careful management of roads and access elsewhere
- Connectivity Between Bears in Canada and the US Northern Rockies.
- Management plans must be adaptive, especially to deal with climate change, its effects on bear foods, and ongoing human encroachment in grizzly bear habitat.

## Promote Stewardship and Protection of Private Lands

### Fix Inadequate Governance

### Adapt with Climate Change

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