

**Transcript
Jack Oelfke
The Grizzly Beat
Episode 15
August, 2016**

Louisa Willcox: Welcome to the Grizzly Beat. This is Louisa Willcox and we're here today with Jack Oelfke, Jack is the chief natural and cultural resources manager for the North Cascades National Park Service Complex. And he's here today to talk about the possibility of recovery and restoration of the grizzly bear to the North Cascades. Welcome Jack.

Jack: Thanks Louisa. Glad to be here.

L: So, maybe you can share a bit about the history of the grizzly bear in the North Cascades, and what happened to them.

J: So, the grizzly bear of course has long been on the landscape here, for millennia. It was -- the North Cascades ecosystem is just part of the broad range of the grizzly bear that was on the landscape before European settlement. So they've been here for millennia. There's indications that when the Hudson Bay Company arrived in this area early 1800s, that they were heavily trapping out grizzly bears. So they were here pre-settlement clearly. More recently then, they have been struggling to keep a population here because of all of the human-induced mortality that has occurred. But they've long been here on the landscape in the North Cascades.

L: So what is the current status of grizzly bears in the North Cascades?

J: We believe that we do not have currently a reproducing population. The last known reproduction that occurred in the ecosystem -- and when I say the ecosystem, I'm talking the North Cascades ecosystem. It's about 10,000 square miles south of the border with Canada. And then of course the ecosystem itself naturally extends into Canada roughly another 3,800 square miles, so quite a large ecosystem. On par, size wise, with those back in the Rockies, Yellowstone or Northern Continental Divide, so a large ecosystem.

The best information we have now is that the last known reproducing female was sited about 20 years ago, in 1996. So, it's been some time, and we certainly have been trying hard to document if there are grizzly bears out there. And we believe there's perhaps an occasional straggler that comes down perhaps from B.C. But no reproduction.

We've had a lot of good research work especially in what are likely the best parts of the habitat of the ecosystem, using the hair snare techniques to try and detect grizzly bears. And it's quite an extensive effort by a local biologist Bill Gaines and the Alliance folks. And just no for at least three plus years of intensive effort, not a single grizzly bear was picked up in the hair snare work. We do get an occasional sighting just north of the

border, including even last year, a few miles north of the border, but there's just no known reproduction going on.

So today's status is there might be a few wander through, but there's no known reproduction going on.

L: So what led the federal government to discussion of importation or reintroduction of grizzly bears to the North Cascades?

J: Well, so a little bit of background: when the National Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was written, the North Cascades was one of the areas considered to be included for recovery. And in fact by about 1991, that decision was made that there would be recovery of grizzly bears here in the North Cascades -- the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee made that decision. By a few years later, 1997, we finally had the North Cascades Ecosystem Recovery Chapter completed, which outlined what steps would be needed to try and recover the bear here.

We have completed a number of those, or at least have worked extensively on a number of those. The research needed to document the habitat is still suitable. For example the foods exist here for the grizzly bear. Education and outreach -- we get quite a large recreating public here who love these mountains up and down the Cascades. And sanitation, waste management, garbage management and so on. A lot of that had been done.

The last key task to furthering the recovery of the bear here was to complete an EIS, go through the NEPA process that we could go to the public with what are perhaps the best ways to go about how we will recover grizzly bears here.

And so that willpower, that political will with the different agencies and the funding to complete an EIS. It's a fairly costly process. That all came together in late 2014. And by early 2015, we started the EIS process, so all of that reflects that through the Endangered Species Act and recovery processes, that this ecosystem is one of those places on the map in the West where grizzly recovery was identified to occur. So that's kind of the legal side related to Endangered Species Act of why it's going on here in this ecosystem.

But along with that, of course, is the idea of here's an ecosystem, a large ecosystem missing some key species that have been lost due to human-induced mortality. And the mission of the National Park Service, for example, and the desires to restore species as part of the natural heritage of the state of Washington and so on -- and all that kind of comes together as to why the consideration to recover grizzly bears back here in this ecosystem. And so we're about a year and a half into that process now.

L: Right. So how is the public responding to the prospect of grizzly bears? You're obviously early in this environmental impact statement process, which means you've gone out and met with communities. What kind of response are you getting?

J: Again, we started in early 2015, formally anyway. We certainly have talked about grizzly bear recovery for decades here, but the formal process began a year and a half ago. We had public scoping in March of 2015 in several locations around the ecosystem for public meetings, And we got about 2,900 comments as part of that process.

Briefly, to summarize, we had broad support for it. From those who commented both in the public setting, as well as through Internet. Certainly some concerns however, not unexpected. So we've certainly have noted that those concerns, in general, focused on personal safety when you're out hiking or horseback riding or doing whatever in the mountains in the ecosystem. Interesting concern about will there be loss of access into the ecosystem. People are very interested and concerned if their favorite road or trail is going to be closed to support grizzly bear recovery. And then concerns about livestock depredation. So a number of things like that, again, not unexpected. But so, we have been, in particular, talking about those types of things when we do get out with the public, and certainly we'll address them in the EIS.

L: But it sounds like nothing insurmountable.

J: No, no I don't think so. This ecosystem, as I often say, benefits from the experiences of Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide -- Glacier, Flathead, Bob Marshall. Because those ecosystems were lucky never to completely lose the grizzly bear, always have had them, always have had people living and working and playing and recreating in those ecosystems. And so the good and bad, the difficulties and successes that have occurred there, we can grab some of that, learn from that and try and apply it here.

The challenge is that we often see is trying to provide the context of all the number of people and numbers of grizzly bears that are in those ecosystems. And it's working there. And trying to get folks to look at and ponder if that can work here, and of course we believe it can. But we can draw from those ecosystems, as we try and work through some of these concerns about personally safety and so on.

L: And of course technology has helped improve our ability to protect ourselves and our livestock and our property, with electric fence and bear spray that wasn't around that long ago. And of course the return in some areas to grazing with the assistance of guard dogs, livestock guardian dogs, a history that dates back to Europe. So it seems that there's quite a bit of positive examples that can be utilized from Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide.

J: Yeah, there are and so we are trying to capitalize on that. There is some inherent mistrust of government that is out there, and again, not unexpected. And so that's a little bit tougher nut to crack responding to some of that. But the whole process and the way we are approaching this -- we being there's four agencies involved in this the two lead agencies are the Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and we have a couple of cooperating agencies, U.S Forest Service and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Our approach is to be transparent and just put out there: here's what we know, and here's what we expect, so again drawing heavily from those other ecosystems.

L: You work collaboratively with non-profits as well that are doing quite a bit of outreach. Chris Morgan's group formally known as Grizzly Bear Outreach Project. Maybe you could talk about how that works?

J: They play their role. The EIS NEPA process is of course very formal, and very legal, and we stress that there needs to be a very clear separation between what the agencies are responsible for, which is to pursue and develop the EIS process and work with that. Part of that certainly is outreach and education.

A role some of the NGOs are choosing to play is to also, I would categorize it, as outreach and education. Doing things with their resources and access to the public and others in their own way. So reaching their membership or just the public in general. So it certainly is helpful to the process in that others are, in particular, trying to talk to the public about the facts of grizzly bear ecology and recovery and so on, while at the same time clearly indicating that they're doing this at their own, following their own interests and program, but it works hopefully toward the eventual goal of grizzly recovery here.

L: Jack, maybe you can share with us your thoughts about the timeline and next steps. So where are we with the completion of this EIS? And when might recovery occur? And how many bears would be brought in, for example, over what period of time?

J: Lots of questions there. So the process, an EIS is typically about three years, although it often can be delayed by events and as information needs to be considered. We're about a year and a half into that, we perhaps will be a little bit slow getting a draft EIS out now than we thought this summer, but probably now toward later fall, because we just need to properly dig into some issues a little bit deeper. So this fall, late this fall we hope we will go to the public with a draft EIS in which we would lay out, in particular, what alternatives we believe are viable to consider for recovery.

I need to stress that the alternatives to recovery range from "no action," which is what we've been doing for 20 years -- which is managing this ecosystem, in particular, the habitat as if there are grizzly bears here. And again, there's only a few we believe. But do nothing anymore proactive than that. So in other words grizzly bears would have to come in on their own.

And then a number of more action alternatives as to how grizzly bear recovery would occur. And so those will be laid out in the draft EIS.

There was an EIS completed for grizzly bear recovery in the Bitterroot ecosystem, I believe it was completed by around the year 2000. It's been a useful example of consideration of what might be possibilities for alternatives, so we certainly have looked at that for some ideas. So that process will play out later this fall, and the hope would be that by the end of 2017, we would have the formal record of decision. That legal decision

that says: here's how we're going to implement grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades. We'll see if we can hold to that schedule, we're hopeful.

L: So along the lines of actual recovery steps: I mean you're talking about importing bears to the ecosystem say five bears a year for five years, that's what Idaho was going to do. Is that kind of along the lines of what you're thinking?

J: That was at the Bitterroots we're talking about, is for one I think it was actually the preferred alternative, was to bring in five bears a year for five years to establish essentially a 25 bear founding population, and then grow the population from there. We certainly would consider something like that, bringing bears in. There's different things to consider there, but that likely will be at least of the alternatives considered, is to move some bears in. The fine details of that are still being worked out. So something like will certainly be in general what will be considered. It's not an easy task to think about doing that and moving bears like that.

I kind of referenced earlier the "no action" and that that would imply that bears would get here on their own. I'd like to comment a bit on that. We certainly hear that a lot from people. Why don't you just sit back, and if you're managing the habitat and you've got this good habitat as we believe we do, why aren't they showing up? And the simple answer is we've lost that connectivity to other populations. There are actually bears over the Selkirks.

As I think you mentioned earlier, but there's a big separation of that ecosystem to the North Cascades and a lot of agriculture and human activity in between. But to the North of us which is where most people think grizzly bears would naturally move down from, is also -- their population to the north of us is very very limited and there has been development and resource extraction and road development and so on there. And so we've pretty much lost that connectivity to the North as well. And then those really are the only options for connectivity, north to B.C. or East to the Selkirks. Again, we see an occasional bear in B.C. north of us, but nothing has led to reproducing bears down in the North Cascades.

L: Well a number of years ago, the British Columbian government was talking about restoration of bears on their side of the North Cascades, and that fell through I think for political reasons. Is there hope that the Canadians will step up along with the U.S. North Cascades Park and others to recover this population as a trans-boundary population?

J: Yeah, I mean there's certainly talking about that I know. A different example, as an analogy here in this same ecosystem, North Cascades, we are presently restoring Fisher populations. And we're getting those from British Columbia, and so British Columbia is helping us immensely in that process. But at the same time with Grizzly Bears now, they've made the comment that their recovery of the grizzly bear in southern B.C. may depend on what happens down here. They would be looking perhaps to benefit from us. Because they just have their own set of hurdles with the habitat and so on, that just is. It's what has happened over time there.

And I know we work with a B.C. bear biologist. He engages with us on this EIS, for example, and we certainly are interested in what happens across the border. So yes, I think longer term, there is that hope and that will have to play out on their side of the border as it can. I certainly can't speak for them, but they certainly interested.

L: So, back to Idaho for a second. As you mentioned in 2002 the government's efforts to restore grizzly bears to the Central Idaho Selway Bitterroot ecosystem which was a vast ecosystem were aborted for political reason and Idaho Dirk Kempthorne, who went on to be the Secretary of Interior, called grizzly bears "massive flesh eating carnivores that weren't welcome in the state of Idaho." So how do you think the government is trying to avoid a similar outcome in the case of the Cascades?

J: Trust me, we are well aware of what happened there. And those circumstances cross our mind. So really the best approach we believe we can take is to, again, is to be transparent and upfront with what recovery here might be. What establishing a population here might look like and be, and how it would be managed with all the concerns of human conflicts involved. Again, I think we benefit from the experience of Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide.

I'm frequently quoting the number of grizzly-human incidents in Yellowstone, because I have such a nice record of information on those lives to provide the context of how extremely rare the bad incidents happen. Which is not at all to dismiss that sometimes bad things happen. But in the context of people being out in the woods, in the wilderness, in parks, forests, whatever, bad things can happen. And in terms of how often it happens relating to grizzly bears, it's extremely rare. And so trying to provide context like that is important. And so much of that comes down to the education and outreach.

You mentioned earlier, the newer technologies of bear spray -- there are a lot of things that people can do to limit the chance of a bad encounter with a grizzly bear. Hike with groups, make noise, and store your food properly -- so much of it is related to food storage.

And we also talk about, one thing we have been active, again, here for a few decades is, because we certainly have an ample black bear population, is that most of the things you do to keep your food away from black bears directly translates to the same with grizzly bears. And so if you're backpacking or whatever. And so it's not like the recreating public doesn't have a clue or experience about these things with wildlife in the mountains. So much of it can directly carry over to working with grizzly bears. So having said that, again we are very cognizant that at times, bad things happen, it's unfortunate that the media sensationalizes it so much. But we just are trying to present the facts and hope that folks will recognize that they can safely be out in grizzly bear country.

L: So what role could the North Cascades ecosystem potentially have in the context of overall recovery of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states where we have most of the populations or all of the rest of the populations in the Northern Rockies? Do you see any

relationship or North Cascades as being isolated forever? And what kind of role would you see the Cascades playing in the overall debate?

J: There's kind of the legal side of things. Recovery here will certainly help in the overall recovery of the species under the Endangered Species Act so there's that. But I guess I would mostly say that recovery here is a benefit biologically, ecologically to the viability of the species. Certainly there's a lot of bears in the Northern Rockies relatively speaking, but they're relatively secure, but to have another sustaining population separated from those would seem to be a benefit to the species as well, so there's that part that just for the overall health and viability of the grizzly bear in the lower 48. It makes sense to have multiple viable populations. So I think recovery here in particular would help along that line.

L: Right. So as you mentioned before, the North Cascades is a vast place. The whole ecosystem is on a par of, like the Glacier ecosystem, or the Yellowstone ecosystem. So best case scenario, what do you think recovery of grizzly bears could look like in the sense of how many bears do you think we might be able to support with the public land that's there?

J: Sure. Well, I guess the best case scenario would be that in likely several decades -- and this is a very slow long term process to get us there. And that's largely related to, as I think you well know Louisa, the slow reproductive capability of grizzly bears in general. It's going to be a long process. But about 20 years ago when the North Cascades recovery plan was written, the best estimates at that time -- which is largely based on just the sheer size, acreage of the ecosystem and some sense of home range sizes -- I think the best estimate there was 200-400 bears.

But we have more recently had a modeling effort by some local bear biologist who looked at the ecosystem -- in particular, the habitat quality overlaid that with the road system, because we all know roads are particularly hard on grizzly bears. And so and then he tried to build in a bit about a few other things, but then the average home range sizes for grizzly bears and such. And the numbers come out fairly similar. So it's hard to fill out a number, so at this point were still saying that that estimate from 20 years ago is probably within range. And that's, again, many decades down the road and everything goes as we hoped it would go. It appears the habitat can support that number of bears.

L: Well I wish you the best of luck and look forward to the next chapter.

J: Yeah it's an exciting process, and exciting times, and trying to complete some more recovery of species here in this ecosystem.

L: What a wonderful idea. So this is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Times, and we're here with Jack Oelfke from North Cascades National Park Service Complex. Thank you very much.