

Research shows grizzlies in backyards a lot more than previously thought

Posted: Friday, Jul 22, 2005 - 03:11:59 pm PDT

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Hungry Horse News

Despite economic expansion in western Montana, grizzly bear populations are on the rise and grizzly behavior is becoming less of a mystery.

Speaking at the Montanans for Multiple Use meeting last night, Chris Servheen, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Program Coordinator, presented newly collected data that showed where and when bears move around their habitat, something that was previously misunderstood.

Servheen said USFWS has planted Global Positioning System collars on grizzlies in the Swan Valley and discovered that bears move near roadways and houses at night, a time they have learned is less dangerous.

"It tells us what bears do in the dark," he said. "It opens the door to understanding animals."

Knowing when and where bears move around allows wildlife managers to create strategies on how to deal with problem bears as well as the interaction between humans and grizzlies.

Using the Yellowstone ecosystem as an example, Servheen said that the bear recovery program has helped triple the population of grizzlies there since 1983, helping de-list that population.

As it stands, over 600 bears reside in and around Yellowstone, and Servheen said that by late 2006, the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which stretches from Glacier National Park to Ovando, will have an accurate grizzly count when a bear DNA sampling study is finished.

"There's been significant progress," he said. "We certainly believe grizzly bears have increased in population in this ecosystem."

Grizzlies are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

But one difficulty Servheen sees in de-listing the bear population in Montana is the amount of private land that is traditional bear habitat, a cause for concern when viewed with the increasing human caused bear fatalities.

"More than 17 percent of this ecosystem is private land in the recovery zone," he said. "We need to work with private landowners and we need to deal with this mortality problem."

2004 saw the largest number of grizzlies killed by humans since 1974, a disturbing trend that can be combated by having a strict management plan in place, something that can be completed once more data is collected.

"We need to build a management plan for this area," he said. "That's the same thing we've already done in Yellowstone. We're way behind the Yellowstone system."

Part of the success of the Yellowstone recovery, Servheen said, was the cooperation of the people that lived near the recovery zone. Proper education and dialogue, he said, will lead to better management capabilities.

"The recovery of the grizzly bears is not a biological issue, it's a social issue," he said. "Those people are behind the recovery of the Yellowstone bears."

Western Montana's bears face an increased human population that Yellowstone's bears don't, one reason why the mortality rate is higher in this area.

"This illegal killing is a problem," Servheen said. "It's like a festering thing out there."

Using data overlays on satellite imagery, Servheen pinpointed exact areas near roadways and homesites in the Swan Valley that bears frequent at night, saying that knowing this information now could help reduce mortality rates.

Seeing how bears stay in the Valley all year long was a definite surprise for the researchers.

"It's a real eye opener for us bear guys," he said. "These grizzly bears are acting the way we thought black bears would."

Public reaction to the data was overwhelmingly positive, with F.H. Stoltze general manager Ron Buentemeier being the most vocal in his responses.

Buentemeier praised Servheen's information, but pleaded for more public outreach programs, saying that the "laws need to be changed" to punish bear poachers.

Montanans for Multiple Use president Fred Hodgeboom praised Servheen's research, saying that it "confirms a lot of the observations of the citizens that live and work around these bears for the long term."

Hodgeboom also said that the data clearly showed that "cookie cutter" designated wildlife areas don't necessarily work and that bears will find a way to adapt to their habitat, even with humans in the way.

"The bears live where the habitat is," he said. "Hopefully this will get a dialogue started with the public and the Forest Service."

MFMU invited Servheen to speak on the study at its meeting Tuesday night.