

Public Opinion and Knowledge Survey of Grizzly Bears in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem: Executive Summary

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During July and August of 2007, a public opinion and knowledge survey was conducted in Lincoln and Sanders County, Montana. The survey was designed to measure public understanding of grizzly bears and management in the Cabinet Mountains and Yaak Valley of Montana (hereafter referred to as the CYE: Cabinet Yaak Ecosystem). The survey provided a 'snapshot' of knowledge and attitudes of grizzly bears that residents of Lincoln County and Sanders County, Montana currently hold. The survey results offer wildlife managers a way to identify future information and education needs for the CYE and provided residents an opportunity to express their feelings about grizzly bear issues outside of a public meeting setting.

Communities interviewed were: Libby, Troy, and Yaak in Lincoln County, and Heron, Noxon, Thompson Falls, and Trout Creek in Sanders County. A telephone survey was selected as the survey method, because of the commonality of telephone ownership and the predominant use of landline telephones in the area. Calls were placed on different days of the week and at different times of the day, including evenings and weekends, to allow for equal participation by adults over 18 years of age. The survey consisted of 50 questions and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Content for the survey questionnaire was designed to assess resident's attitudes and knowledge of grizzly bears and population recovery in the CYE. The survey focused primarily on knowledge, opinions, and informational sources about grizzly bears in the CYE, knowledge and support of grizzly bear recovery, and opinions about management activities and recreation. Respondents were asked to classify their opinions as *strong*, *moderate*, *neither/nor*, or *don't know*. Responsive Management, a public opinion research firm, conducted 502 interviews, with a participation rate of 85%. Margin of error for this survey was plus or minus 4 percent.

Though 54% of respondents believed that grizzly bears can be dangerous to humans, more than 70% indicated that grizzly bears belong in the CYE and should be preserved as a symbol of our national heritage. Fear of grizzly bears appeared to be the primary reason why some respondents opposed having them in the CYE. Respondents were aware of the most common reasons why a grizzly bear might attack a human, but the majority was unaware of how many people are actually attacked or killed by grizzlies each year in the lower 48 states, which is relatively infrequent. We were unable to locate any documented cases of a grizzly bear caused human injury or death within the CYE in the past 35 years.

Ninety percent of respondents felt that humans can prevent most conflicts with grizzly bears and the majority stated that they would even accept changes to current garbage disposal methods if it would help prevent problems with grizzly bears. If educational efforts can demonstrate to

residents that using simple techniques for living safely in grizzly bear country can prevent conflicts before they occur, fear of having grizzly bears in the CYE may be reduced.

While the survey revealed that 57% of respondents supported grizzly bear recovery in the CYE, the level of support decreased to 44% when respondents were asked about achieving a grizzly bear population goal of 100 bears. Increased educational efforts about biology, habitat, and spatial needs of grizzly bears may help address public concerns about the CYE's ability to accommodate an increase in the grizzly bear population.

Wildlife biologists and managers recommend augmentation as one of the strategies necessary to effectively recover the CYE grizzly bear population. However, the survey showed that the level of support for grizzly bear population recovery efforts in the CYE increased from 57% to almost 75% if recovery could be done without using augmentation.

One of the more controversial subjects brought up during public meetings in the last decade was implementation of motorized access restrictions on National Forest lands. However, one third of respondents stated that they were unaware of the current road restrictions on National Forest lands. In addition, 69% stated that grizzly bear recovery efforts had not negatively affected their employment or recreation opportunities. When asked about support for current road restrictions, 49% supported and 42% were opposed to them. Fifty-eight percent were opposed to any additional road restrictions in the future and 31% were in support of them.

Overall, the majority of respondents indicated support for the recovery of grizzly bears in the CYE, yet concern remained over specific management actions (road restrictions, augmentation and final population goals) proposed to achieve recovery. Respondents were more aware of augmentation efforts in the early 1990's than they were of more recent efforts (2005 and 2006), suggesting that better efforts are needed to keep the public informed of this aspect of the grizzly bear recovery program and educational efforts may benefit residents understanding of this management practice. Most often cited sources of information from the participants were newspapers, magazines, television and film. These sources probably offer the best media opportunities to reach the local public.

Survey responses regarding grizzly bear food habits, abundance, and human injury rates indicate a need for biologists and managers to provide the public with accurate information about general grizzly bear biology.

A full copy of the report can be found at <http://www.igbconline.org/html/selkirk.html>