

Los Angeles Times

APRIL 3, 2006

Can the grizzly survive success?

By Doug Peacock

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THE FIRST Yellowstone grizzly bear I saw surprised me while I was soaking in a hot spring. I jumped up, nearly blacked out from the effects of the hot water, and then smashed into the closest tree, opening a two-inch gash in my forehead. Terrified, I scrambled naked up the tree — a pine that turned out to be no bigger than a Christmas tree. Fortunately, the mother bear and her cubs totally ignored me while I shivered in the 40-degree October air for half an hour — clinging to the upper boughs of the tiny tree, blue and bleeding like some large species of silly bird. Those bears got my attention.

That was 1968, and I had just returned from Vietnam in the middle of my second tour as a Green Beret medic. I was out of sorts with my country and estranged. Not unlike a wounded animal, I crawled back into

the wilderness of the northern Rockies, where I ran into the great bears that so dominated the physical and psychic landscape. Self-indulgence is utterly impossible in grizzly country. These bears are things of great beauty; mystery married to danger. They can chew your rear off anytime they want (but they almost never do). It was exactly what I needed — the grizzlies got me out of myself so I could reconnect the threads of my own humanity. I think they saved my life.

During those years, I learned that Yellowstone National Park had fed bears at huge open-pit garbage dumps for decades. In 1968, the park abruptly decided to close those dumps, in defiance of scientists who warned that grizzlies cut off cold turkey would prowl campgrounds and nearby towns in search of their accustomed food. Which is just what the bears did, until they were shot or removed. Within five years, at least 229 grizzlies were killed. By the mid-1970s, Yellowstone's grizzly population plummeted to 200 or so. I was lurking there all those years in Yellowstone, watching from the tree line, sensing what the scientists were confirming: The grizzlies were

in a steep and dangerous decline and, without help, even on the road to extinction. In 1975, Yellowstone's grizzlies were listed under the Endangered Species Act as a "threatened" species.

Recently, the Bush administration has proposed stripping the Yellowstone grizzly of this protection. The public comment period ended March 20 (with 250 scientists signing a letter urging continued protection) and now the secretary of Interior will decide if the grizzly will be removed from the endangered species list.

The big bears, and the protection afforded their habitat, are a lot of trouble for those who want to mine, log, explore for gas and oil, develop or build roads on the public lands around Yellowstone. I believe the administration will make a political decision to take the Yellowstone grizzly off the endangered species list. But its scientific argument for stripping the grizzly of protection remains frail and troublesome.

I live 45 miles north of Yellowstone, and an occasional grizzly wanders up the mountains and looks down on my house, buoying my spirits and

sustaining my hope. Indeed, since the 1975 protections, Yellowstone grizzlies have expanded their range and numbers. Today, as many as 600 may roam what is known as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, an area spanning Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and portions of six national forests.

This population increase is the core of the government's argument that the Yellowstone grizzly has "recovered" and no longer needs protection. The administration says it's time to turn over grizzly management to Wyoming, Montana and Idaho .

But the size and quality of the grizzly habitat is steadily deteriorating. We chip away at the edges of grizzly country every year; only the grizzly's endangered status prevents road construction. Also, bear food sources would be threatened. Pine nuts, cutthroat trout and army cutworm moths all face potentially catastrophic declines.

Finally, the Yellowstone population is isolated genetically and geographically from other grizzlies. It is an island surrounded by an inhospitable human landscape of highways and towns. Without linkage to other grizzly bears, it is genetically doomed; all 600 bears are descended from those remaining 200 or so grizzlies. The gene pool doesn't get any bigger. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to helicopter in an occasional female grizzly from Canada or maybe Glacier National Park . But the only long-term solution is to expand the Yellowstone bears' range so that they can intermingle with other grizzly populations along the Canadian border.

The Yellowstone grizzly is part of our national heritage. Taking it off the endangered species list without first linking it up with other bear populations would be a grave mistake.
