Bozeman Daily Chronicle

Guest column: Move to strip protections for Yellowstone grizzlies premature, lacks transparency

November 25, 2013

By Louisa Willcox,
Guest columnist

At recent grizzly bear meetings in Bozeman, federal and state managers announced plans to remove Endangered Species Act protections for Yellowstone's threatened grizzly bears next year. The delisting push, which is being driven by states that want to control and hunt bears, is justified in part by new government claims that grizzly population numbers have jumped from an estimated 600 during past three years to 741 bears.

For many reasons, however, it's far too soon to conclude that Yellowstone's charismatic bear population is viable enough to again allow hunting. Chief among those concerns are: serious questions about the science behind the new estimates of bear numbers; increased threats to bears, including the fact that climate-driven changes to their food sources are resulting in more conflicts with humans; and the fact that Yellowstone is an isolated remnant of the area grizzly bears once roamed.

There's no doubt that a nearly 20 percent jump in bear numbers sounds impressive. But this jump is not based on an actual count of bears – it's based on a revision of the methods used to estimate the population. And independent scientists can't fairly evaluate the claim because the government has steadfastly refused to release the taxpayer-funded data upon which the new population numbers are based.

Because grizzlies have the slowest reproductive rate of any mammal in North America, it is not biologically possible that the population has increased so much, especially given the deaths of more than 100 bears during the last three years. In other words, the jump is largely an artifact of changes in counting methods – paper bears rather than real bears.

This is why an open and transparent process of scientific inquiry is so important. The integrity of the scientific enterprise relies on creating and testing alternative hypotheses to explain the data. It is essential to know with great confidence how the population is actually doing, and what the future trends are most likely to be, in order for the public to make an informed decision on whether removing federal protections is appropriate. As James Madison said in 1822, "a popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is a prelude to a farce or a tragedy or both."

While there is doubt about the numbers, from a bear's point of view there is no doubt about what is happening to the ecosystem: it is unraveling. Three of the four traditional mainstays of the grizzly bear's diet – whitebark pine, cutthroat trout and elk – have either collapsed or are in decline. And drought and climate change are likely to worsen the bear's future prospects.

Loss of whitebark pine and trout is forcing bears to eat more meat to compensate. This results in more conflicts with livestock operators and elk hunters and more dead bears. And eating more meat is an especially hazardous business for females, which tend to lose more cubs to male bears as they

compete for this rich source of protein and fat.

It is also important to put Yellowstone's bears into the larger context of overall grizzly bear recovery. Yellowstone National Park and surrounding wilderness is an isolated island – less than 1 percent of the territory where grizzly bears once lived.

Research has shown that Yellowstone's bears have lost genetic diversity during their 100 years of solitude. But, rather than building a naturally sustainable population by reconnecting Yellowstone to other more robust grizzly populations in Glacier National Park and Canada, the government is planning instead to truck bears in, putting Yellowstone bears on permanent life support.

There is much more to do to recover bears. Grizzly populations in the Cabinet-Yaak, Selkirks and North Cascades are small and struggling for survival. And many areas that could support bears, such as the Selway-Bitteroot, southern Rockies and elsewhere, lack bears altogether.

We shouldn't put all our eggs in one basket or walk away from recovery before the job is done. Instead, we should err on the side of caution and sound science.

That means providing open access to data that the public paid for and maintaining protections until bears are fully recovered.

Louisa Willcox, with the Center for Biological Diversity, has been working to protect grizzly bears and their habitat for the last 30 years.