

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Could much-feared grizzlies hit the comeback

Peter Fimrite

Saturday, June 28, 2014

The ghost of the California grizzly bear still lurks in the rugged backcountry here nearly a century after the last of its kind vanished.

The hulking specter of the legendary beast haunts the giant sequoias, skulks along the mountain ridges, floats through the brilliant green meadows and lives as a reminder in places like Grizzly Falls in adjacent Sequoia National Park.

It was in this spectacular High Sierra wilderness where *Ursus californicus* - the most fearsome of all bear species - was last seen in 1924. And it is here, amid the granite cliffs and roiling Kings River, where conservationists want to bring back California's most revered predator.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a legal petition this month calling on the U.S. Fish and Wild-



Visitors tour Zumwalt Meadow in Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park, once and possible future grizzly habitat. Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

life Service to return grizzlies to their former stomping grounds in California and throughout the American West.

"Grizzly bears are an iconic animal in this state. They are on the flag. They are on road signs," said Noah Greenwald, the endangered-species director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The loss of large predators is a global problem, from lions in the African savannah to tigers to wolves to bears in North America. It has had real consequences for ecosystems. Bringing the bears back would correct a historic wrong."

The petition, which would require the Fish and Wildlife Service to greatly expand its 1993 bear recovery plan, identifies 110,000 square miles of potential grizzly habitat in the Gila/Mogollon complex in Arizona and New Mexico,

Utah's Uinta Mountains, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the Sierra Nevada of California.  
1,500 grizzlies

Currently, there are about 1,500 wild grizzlies in four states - Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Washington - with most living in and around Yellowstone National Park.

The idea is to more than triple the number of grizzlies in the lower 48 states - eventually reaching 6,000 bears - allowing wildlife biologists to declare victory in the recovery effort for the species, which was listed as threatened in 1975 under the Endangered Species Act.

It would mean returning the largest predator in North America - a species that can weigh twice as much as a black bear and can kill a human with a single swipe of its claw - to the most populous state in the country. It's an idea that is bound to create a furor among ranchers and farmers, who also opposed protections for wolves, which were listed early this month under the California Endangered Species Act.

The reasoning behind the petition, Greenwald said, is that grizzlies are native and played an important ecological role, digging up soil and spreading seeds in their feces, which increased plant diversity. They also compete with and keep in check other animal populations, such as black bears, which are growing in number, he said. One cannot ignore the fact, also, that grizzly sightings in Yellowstone prompt cars to stop and camera-toting

crowds to gather.

"People love bears," he said. "Anyone who has been to Yellowstone knows the pleasure they bring."

Won't be easy

The wildlife service is legally required to respond to the petition, but no timetable has been set for the process. Chris Servheen, the grizzly bear recovery coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said reintroduction is no easy task and there is no money available for the work.

"You don't just sprinkle the magic dust and throw the bears out and suddenly you've got them in the Sierra or the Grand Canyon," he said. "It's much more complicated than that. We are fully stretched right now in the four states where we have grizzlies."

The idea is unnerving to some California residents.

Lewis Evans, the proprietor of the Kings Canyon Lodge, is certain the brawny bruins would quickly run out of roots, berries and deer calves, and start searching for tasty-looking tourists.

"What are you going to say - 'Oh, Mr. Grizzly, stay here; don't go down to Lewis' and eat the tourists'?" Evans said. "It might work in Yellowstone, but I don't know why you'd want to put them in the Sierra. It would be like bringing back *Tyrannosaurus rex*."

The burly mammals with the distinctive

hump on their backs roamed throughout California before the Gold Rush. It's estimated that there were 10,000 grizzlies in the state when European immigrants first arrived.

### Shot and poisoned

They thrived on abundant food and the Mediterranean climate in the San Joaquin Valley and Coast Range. Early settlers described actual herds of grizzlies feeding in clover fields, with cubs in trees shaking branches for acorns.

Grizzlies were abundant in the Sierra, but they also caught salmon in the rivers that emptied into the San Francisco Bay. They were said to be the largest and most powerful bears, growing up to 8 feet tall and weighing as much as 2,000 pounds, according to history books. The larger bears in Alaska reach only 7 feet and weigh 800 pounds.

The end came rather quickly for the native bruins after people began pouring into California during the Gold Rush. Settlers shot and poisoned the bears to protect their livestock, and bounty hunters killed them by the thousands.

A bear shot in Tulare County in 1922 was long considered the last California grizzly, but there were several reports in 1924 of a grizzly at Horse Corral Meadow in what is now Sequoia National Park. That bear was subsequently killed, according to historians, making it the state's last official grizzly. The proposed grizzly zone has not yet

been laid out in California, but the petition says there are 7,747 square miles of wilderness in the southern Sierra far enough from homes, roads, ranches and farmland to support the burly behemoths.

### Prime habitat

That untamed land, Greenwald said, begins at Zumwalt Meadow, at the end of Highway 180, which winds over mountains and through the immense Kings Canyon east of Fresno.

"You can almost picture it - grizzlies grazing in there," said Greenwald, pointing out thimble berries, tule reeds and other savory grizzly treats as he strolled recently through the remote wetland between towering granite cliffs. "This right here would be the prime area. This kind of meadow habitat is where bears love to forage."

Greenwald said bears from Sequoia and Kings Canyon could cross the ridge and roam uninterrupted through the John Muir Wilderness over the Kern Plateau all the way to Yosemite. It is, he said, "one of the longest roadless areas in the lower 48."

The petition was filed in large part because federal officials are considering delisting grizzly bears in what they call the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide, a 19,000-square-mile region that includes wilderness areas in Montana, Wyoming and eastern Idaho. The reason, Servheen said, is that the

region now supports about 800 bears. That's three times the number of bruins roaming over twice the area they covered 30 years ago, he said.

But Greenwald said today's population is just a fraction of the 100,000 that historians believe once roamed North America. The big bears now exist on only 4 percent of the lands where they once held court, he said.

### Mixed feelings

The petition argues that the wildlife service is required under the Endangered Species Act to help the bears recover over their entire historic range, not just in one region.

"We shouldn't be closing the book on grizzly recovery but beginning a new chapter," Greenwald said.

He's got his work cut out for him. Several campers and day trippers in the region were skeptical, mainly because of sensationalized descriptions and, occasionally, actual news stories depicting grizzlies ripping hikers or - in the case of Timothy Treadwell in 2003 - bear whisperers limb from limb.

Toby Burch, 44, who was camping with a friend and their two 7-year-old sons, dipped her feet in the water underneath Grizzly Falls and struggled with the idea of bringing back the animal that gave the waterfall its name.

"I spend the whole day teaching people

about the environment, but it's different when you are putting your family in danger," said Burch, who lives in Temecula (Riverside County) and manages a kayaking company on Catalina Island. "That's my little boy there running off and playing on the rocks. How would he fare if there were grizzlies here?"

Conservationists and federal wildlife officials say the bear's reputation for being aggressive is a myth. They say grizzlies stay away from people when food attractants are removed. The bears also generally stay where you put them, dispersing an average of about 10 miles from their place of birth, said Carl Carroll, a scientist who has done extensive research on bear habitat, including the feasibility of reintroducing grizzlies.

"They need relatively large wild areas but don't disperse long distances like wolves do," Carroll said. "At least for large wilderness areas, the knowledge exists to allow grizzly bears and humans to coexist."

If it is ever going to happen, Servheen said, conservationists will have to persuade a great many residents of California to embrace the idea.

"The best habitat for grizzly bears is inside the human heart," Servheen said. "Building public support and understanding how to live, work and recreate with the bears is a critical thing, and it is not a trivial matter." Legacy of a long-lost bear

The California flag is modeled after a griz-

zly that was captured in 1889 in a publicity stunt concocted by newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. The bear, named Monarch, was kept for 22 years in a cage in Golden Gate Park until it died in 1911. Its stuffed remains can now be seen at the California Academy of Sciences.

Reintroduction of grizzlies

The Center for Biological Diversity petition can be found here: <http://bit.ly/1nQJ9IQ>