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California: The next grizzly habitat? Some want to see it happen



A grizzly bear moves through the brush in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. (James Peaco / Yellowstone National Park / Associated Press)

By JULIE CART

An effort to reintroduce grizzly bears into California is drawing criticism

Could Californians cope with a grizzly bear population? One expert says the state isn't tough enough

Once a California mainstay, grizzly bears left the state in 1924; an effort is underway to bring them back

Black bears are a cherished part of the community here, a woodsy gateway town that funnels tourists to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, where the first question visitors ask of rangers is "Where can I see a bear?"

Local shop owner Cindy Skeen said she often sees black bears around her house, finding them more mischievous than menacing.

Has she heard that grizzlies — a larger, stronger and more dangerous cousin of black bears — might be transplanted to California, where they haven't been seen for nine decades?

Skeen brought her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I don't know ... people let their kids go hiking by themselves out here," she said.

We get people from L.A. and Orange County and they are terrified of black bears. And grizzlies....?- Local shop owner Cindy Skeen

It could happen. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is weighing an environmental group's request to set aside 110,000 square miles for grizzly bears in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado.

If the agency decides to consider reintroducing grizzlies, the next step will be a lengthy process that includes scientific reviews and public hearings that could take years.

Grizzly bears are iconic in California, where they are immortalized on the state flag. But the romance appears to stop there. The big bears were hunted so efficiently that the last grizzly seen in the wild here was in the Sierra in 1924.

Nationally, grizzlies were listed as a threatened species in 1975, and since then no one has been entirely certain where to put them. Like unwelcome relations, grizzlies have been shunted to live within the remote confines of Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding ecosystem.

Yellowstone is not an ideal grizzly habitat and it does not provide enough open country that the bears love.



Yellowstone grizzly bears are on the rebound and outbound

But its 700 grizzlies share 3,400 square miles, ample room to support them so grandly that Fish and Wildlife is expected later this year to remove federal protections for grizzlies in the region.

Finding comparable space may not be possible in California.

Historically, grizzly populations were most dense along the California coast, in the estuaries of big river valleys — the Sacramento, San Joaquin and American — and in San Luis Obispo, Los Osos and the Bay Area.

Those lush tule marshes and coastal valleys offered bears a cornucopia of food at every turn: pronghorn antelope and tule elk, an abundant acorn crop in the fall and plenty of big fish. Fat grizzlies used to roam the Pacific's beaches feasting on washed-up whale carcasses.

But those areas are now dense with Californians.



Grizzlies in Yellowstone - A grizzly bear sow and her cubs in Yellowstone National Park. The last grizzly was seen in the wild in California in 1924. (National Park Service)

Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity, which petitioned federal officials to reintroduce the grizzly, said his organization sees the southern Sierra as the best choice in California. His group envisions releasing 300 to 400 bears in the region, a tract of public land with overlapping parks and wilderness areas.

Wildlife biologists say a population of grizzlies that large would require about 6,000 to 8,000 square miles of habitat.

Encouraging the largest predator on the American landscape to colonize anywhere in a populous state seems unlikely to some experts and unwise to others.

"I can understand people wanting to see them here," said Eric Loft, chief of wildlife for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "But is it really suitable, given that California has nearly 40 million people?"

Greenwald acknowledged the need to proceed cautiously. "At this point what we are proposing is studying the idea," Greenwald said. "This is a long-term project."

Even if grizzlies were reintroduced in the relatively protected confines of national parks, they would most certainly wander out, potentially placing them in conflict with people. The zero-tolerance approach to grizzly-human interactions has been responsible for much of the bear's mortality elsewhere in the U.S.

The grizzly's fearsome reputation is well earned, especially in contrast to black bear behavior. But grizzly aggression toward humans isn't personal and has an explanation based on evolution, wildlife biologists say.

If there was place to put them, I would be arguing very strongly to put them there. I'm sorry there are so many people here.- Dave Graber, former regional chief scientist for the National Park Service

Black bears evolved in forested areas and climb trees if threatened. Grizzlies evolved in open country, with few trees to climb, where the appropriate response to threats was fight or flight. They sometimes run away, but if confronted at close range, they will fight to defend themselves.

Among the factors critical to species survival is "social tolerance," the willingness of humans to abide with wild and sometimes dangerous animals. This could spell trouble for grizzlies.

Many Californians are accustomed to living near black bears who can engage in dumpster diving, pool hopping and climbing trees. Wildlife authorities put ear tags on bears that become habituated to humans, and either haze the creatures away from subdivisions or drug and relocate them.

Generally, wildlife authorities operate on a three-strikes system that gives bears a few chances to associate humans with trouble. Such a grace period would not likely be extended to grizzlies.

Loft, with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the agency's protocols allow game wardens the discretion to immediately put down an animal perceived as a threat to humans.

Elsewhere, notably in Alaska and British Columbia, communities live side-by-side with grizzlies, embedding nails and spikes in window and door frames. Residents carefully dispose of trash and rarely step outside without a rifle.

Dave Graber, former regional chief scientist for the National Park Service, has widely traveled in grizzly country and can't imagine Californians adapting the same way.

"Those people are orders of magnitude tougher than we are," he said. "They have incorporated in their worldview a certain measure of risk that most Californians would be horrified by."

To Graber and other biologists, the possibility of grizzly reintroduction is exciting, but ultimately unmanageable.