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Cover photo by Rita Wolfe

Vital Ground's very first habitat acquisition in 1991, the Toy property along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front.

WHERE THE GRIZZLY CAN WALK, THE EARTH IS HEALTHY AND WHOLE.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S CORNER

Prior to March, I never thought I would write an article to fill this section of Vital News. More than 10 incredibly rewarding years as Vital Ground’s director of lands provided an excess of windshiled time to ponder the future and convince myself that I should remain singularly focused “on the ground” — out in the field working with committed landowners and enthusiastic partners to put together habitat conservation projects to make life easier for wildlife constantly being squeezed into smaller geographies by human development. But in March, as Vital Ground’s board of trustees searched for a new executive director to replace then-retiring Gary Wolfe, I was handed a blessing in disguise when I was “volun-toid” that I would have the opportunity to serve as interim executive director until the search was complete.

It was with trepidation that I agreed, knowing I would be pulled away from fieldwork and the “nuts and bolts” of conservation transactions that I so greatly enjoy, but also fully aware that it would be a significant loss for the organization to shed any of the momentum gained over the past decade.

In short, what followed has proven to be nothing less than a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to broaden my appreciation of the ability of a small motivated group of people to effect change. As the year progressed, Vital Ground’s passionate trustees, advisors and staff consistently amazed me with their expertise, support and encouragement. Not that I didn’t appreciate these qualities before my new posting, but my earlier focus in the field certainly prevented me from fully comprehending the breadth and depth of each individual’s commitment to our important cause. By June, I happily accepted the executive director position, and although the year is not complete, it has already been filled with notable landmarks – some stemming from my own repurposing, but many more presented by the milestone marking Vital Ground’s first quarter-century of work on behalf of the Great Bear.

As you will see in our 25th Anniversary coverage on pages 8-9, Vital Ground took advantage of 2015 to celebrate the fact that it has surpassed 610,000 acres of grizzly bear habitat that the organization has helped conserve or enhance. We were joined by supporters in Chicago, Ill., Missoula, Mont., and Park City, Utah, who gathered to cumulatively generate more than $346,000 (net) to apply toward our ambitious 25th Anniversary fundraising goal of $1.5 million.

The transition also brought opportunities to expand our collective expertise, and Vital Ground is happy to announce the addition of two passionate and seasoned conservationists to its staff (see pages 6-7). Janet Rose is joining Vital Ground in the newly created position of director of conservation initiatives, from which she will advise the organization on how best to inspire new major donors to amplify our accomplishments. Additionally, after a career dedicated to conservation as a wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Gail Bissell has joined Vital Ground as its new conservation manager to help make sure that your support is matched up with the very best opportunities to benefit North America’s grizzly bears!

And still to come this year, that lofty 2015 fundraising effort is progressing to culminate in Vital Ground’s single most collaborative habitat acquisition to date — the Alvord Lake Community Forest Project near Troy, Mont. (See Fall 2014 edition of Vital News.) To help finalize this acquisition in December, Vital Ground has been challenged by founders Doug and Lynne Seus to raise $50,000 in new memberships and first-time donations by year-end. If we succeed, they will match that amount dollar for dollar. You will soon be receiving information on the Bart the Bear Memorial Challenge providing you with the opportunity to assist Vital Ground in meeting that charge.

Vital Ground’s 25th Anniversary presented an incredible milestone to celebrate the fact that one small but passionate land trust has helped conserve and enhance more than 610,000 acres of wildlife habitat in a quarter century. I can hardly wait to embark on the next 25 years — with your help! 🐻
2015 Brings Vital Ground's First Brush with Wildfire

By the third week in October, the area affected by wildfires this year in the United States closed in on 9.4 million acres. It would be remiss to continue without noting the largest single year on record. 2006, resulted in a total of 9,873,745 acres burned. As of this writing, with more than two months to add to that total, 2015 could turn out to be the nation's first 10 million-acre wildfire year of record. So what difference should 43 acres in north Idaho make?

Quite a lot if those acres are located in Boundary County near the Canadian border, and they are situated at the foot of the Selkirk Mountains' eastern edge where the range plunges abruptly into the fertile Kootenai Valley floor. If you are one of the estimated 50-70 grizzly bears that roam the U.S. portion of the Selkirk Mountains Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone, you may have used this area to access early spring forage on low-elevation agricultural lands. The property's remnant fruit orchard may have provided one final, critical meal before heading for higher elevations in winter, or you might have spent a spring morning rooting skunk cabbage in the property's short, steep reach of riparian area that dumps out onto the valley bottom and contributes to the area's irrigation capacity and water quality in the Kootenai River.

In 2005, these 43 acres were donated to Vital Ground by long-time friends and supporters Sig and Anne Weiler of Illinois. The property is located close to two wildlife management areas and adjacent to other public lands. In addition to providing a small retreat for grizzlies, the property harbors habitat for black bears and a diverse array of other wildlife, and hosts important security cover in the heart of high-quality winter range for deer and elk. Wishing to permanently safeguard the land as wildlife habitat, the Weilers removed an old building on the property prior to the donation, helping to reclaim the naturalness of the land before they donated it.

On August 15th, Idaho's Parker Ridge Fire, which spent much of the summer slowly creeping toward the valley floor from higher-elevation U.S. Forest Service lands, aggressively spotted eastward onto the bottom of the valley and then burned back upslope, completely engulfing Vital Ground's property. The good news is that the lush riparian area associated with the small stream crossing the property was spared — providing a natural filter for the soil and ash runoff that will undoubtedly encroach when the area sees significant precipitation.

Higher on the flanks of the Selkirk's, the Parker Ridge fire ultimately might prove beneficial to grizzlies — clearing out decades of downfall and a thick overstory to revitalize a patchwork of undergrowth. Huckleberry, thimbleberry and various forbs should thrive and offer a more abundant offering of entrées for the local bear buffet. We will undoubtedly bring you updates in future issues, but for now, Vital Ground will coordinate with Inland Forest Management — the organization's Idaho habitat stewardship contractor — to make sure we don't miss opportunities to create resilient habitat to permit grizzlies to continue to adapt to a changing landscape.
Although Vital Ground’s primary emphasis is to work with private landowners to conserve wildlife habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife species, last year we expanded our conservation goals to help reduce conflicts between bears and humans by encouraging and supporting “bear aware” communities within our priority project areas. In 2015, Vital Ground granted $55,000 to six partner organizations working either to promote grizzly bear education, outreach and/or bear research – or to groups working directly to conserve crucial landscapes for bears and other wildlife.

**Bear Awareness Projects in Montana’s Swan Valley**

**Swan Valley Bear Resources**

Swan Valley Bear Resources (SVBR), a collaborative of the Swan Ecosystem Center, Northwest Connections, and the U.S. Forest Service, was formed 11 years ago in response to an alarming trend in grizzly bear mortality in the Swan Valley. Pooling resources across multiple organizations and agencies to promote education, reduce bear attractants, and minimize conflicts with livestock, SVBR has made significant strides in protecting grizzlies. The group works to address bear conflicts on private property and educates landowners to help promote coexistence between people and bears. SVBR has implemented a bear resistant-garbage container loaner program, assists landowners with small livestock to erect bear-proof fences, and their trained staff engages with the public to share information about bears and bear safety.

**Brown Bear/Salmon Conservation Easement in Southwest Alaska**

**Bristol Bay Heritage Land Trust**

The Bristol Bay Heritage Land Trust proposes to secure conservation protections for brown bear and chinook and coho salmon habitat in the Nushagak River watershed in Southwest Alaska. These natural areas are important because they are often where bears and bald eagles congregate to feed on salmon. Bristol Bay Heritage Land Trust, a member of the Land Trust Alliance – similar to Vital Ground – proposes to raise $100,000 from partners to secure a no-development conservation easement over 530 acres of salmon and brown bear habitat at the confluence of Harris Creek and the Nushagak River.

**Grizzlies in the North Cascades Video**

**Washington's National Park Fund**

Washington’s National Park Fund has partnered with National Park Conservation Association and Woodland Park Zoo to hire co-founder of Grizzly Bear Outreach Project and Conservation Ecologist Chris Morgan to develop a video to educate the public about the facts associated with grizzly bears. The project will help promote an accurate understanding of North Cascades’ grizzly bears and include visually-arresting graphics and photos designed to bring attention to fascinating and important elements of grizzly bear ecology, safety, behavior, and recovery of the species in the region. The video will be used online, in public presentations, and at public meetings.

**Grizzly Bear Study in Montana’s Blackfoot Valley**

**Montana State University and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

Montana’s Blackfoot Valley has experienced many changes over the past decade. One of the most influential is the arrival and residence of grizzly bears. The small population that has moved into the valley has caused livestock depredation and crop damage. Consequently, ranchers and conservationists search for tools to reduce conflicts. One such tool is the use of electric fence, which has proven effective in reducing conflicts between bears and private property, particularly in calving areas, bee yards, and temporary holding areas for livestock. A project underwritten by Montana State University and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will help support a graduate student’s project titled, “Effects of Electric Fence Permeability on Grizzly Bears in the Blackfoot Valley,” with goals of developing fencing that allows grizzly movement and passage, but hinders unwanted movement and private property damage.

**The Blackfoot Challenge’s Range Rider Program**

**The Blackfoot Challenge**

The Blackfoot Challenge, a collaborative of private landowners and land trusts that coordinate conservation in Montana’s Blackfoot Valley, operates the longest-running range-rider program in the United States. This year marks the organization’s eighth year providing livestock and carni-
vore monitoring across 40,000 acres for some 20-30 ranchers whose livestock are seasonally at risk to depredations from wolves and grizzly bears. The program increases livestock herd supervision rates, uses human presence to discourage attacks, detects and removes carcasses from high-risk sites, monitors livestock herd conditions and health, and provides updates to the local community about locations of wolves and grizzlies. Funding helps establish personnel to support projects such as the summer range-rider program as well as winter carnivore monitoring and human-bear conflict reduction.

25th Anniversary Campaign

Nov. 8, 2015, marked 25 years since Doug and Lynne Seus founded The Vital Ground Foundation. To commemorate two-and-a-half decades of successful conservation efforts in grizzly country—supporters, board of trustees and friends held celebrations in Illinois, Montana and Utah to help Vital Ground achieve its $1.5 million fundraising goal.

At press time, we’re closing in on this year’s ambition: Funds raised from events, grants, donated easements and pledges have raised $1.1 million to help Vital Ground continue to conserve hundreds of thousands of acres of grizzly habitat from Yellowstone to Alaska—an incredible step towards connecting crucial landscapes that once belonged to wild grizzlies and other sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species.

By contributing to our 25th Anniversary Campaign, you will help Vital Ground secure private lands and make a huge impact for grizzlies, other wildlife, the landscape and people. To contribute, go to VitalGround.org and click “Donate.”

THANK YOU! 🙌

Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Grazing-Allotment Retirement

National Wildlife Federation

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) resolves conflicts between wildlife and livestock through the market approach of compensating ranchers for retiring problematic grazing leases on federal land. Restoring wildlife populations has been linked to recovering healthy, functioning ecosystems in the northern Rockies. Thanks to Vital Ground and other funders, NWF has retired 36 grazing allotments in the Yellowstone Ecosystem, totaling 650,000 acres. This approach establishes an important model for resolving chronic conflicts between wildlife and livestock. The most recent success in the Yellowstone area was retirement of the 22,000-acre Upper Gros Ventre allotment, which lies south of the park in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. Cattle in the Upper Gros Ventre allotment have faced chronic conflicts with grizzlies and wolves. 🐻
Vital Ground Hires New Conservation Manager

Following her successful wildlife and habitat conservation career with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP), Gael Bissell recently joined Vital Ground as our new conservation manager.

Gael works part time out of her home in Kalispell, Mont., to take the lead for Vital Ground's habitat conservation projects in the Northern Continental Divide, the Cabinet-Yaak, and the Selkirk Mountain grizzly bear ecosystems. She is also the principal contact for projects in the Yellowstone, Cascades, and Bitterroot Selway regions.

Gael received her bachelor's degree in zoology from Ohio Wesleyan University and her master's in environmental studies at the University of Montana. After backpacking with her husband, Dr. Richard Mace, through the Bob Marshall Wilderness to study grizzly habitat in the early 1980s, she was hired by MPWP to work on wildlife mitigation plans for Hungry Horse and Libby dams in Kalispell; she then held multiple wildlife management positions for over 30 years.

"It took a while for the wildlife mitigation program to evolve," Gael explains, "but after we learned how to collaborate with diverse partners and access a wide variety of funding resources, things took off." Since 1999, the wildlife mitigation program helped conserve over 200,000 acres of important wildlife landscapes in northwest Montana.

Gael began working with Vital Ground on the Alvord Lake project about two years ago. A private landowner there had been searching for some way to conserve this important parcel. Gael invited Vital Ground Executive Director Ryan Lutey to meet with a group of local folks and organizations as well as the landowner; from that initial meeting and subsequent review of this incredible parcel, the Alvord Lake Community Forest project became a reality.

"I greatly appreciate this new opportunity to use my conservation experience to work with a private land trust organization. This will be new and interesting experience for me. Also, as I am married to a well-known and highly respected grizzly bear researcher who focused on the Crown of the Continent, I will be able to help conserve habitat for a species that is important to both of us."

New Director of Conservation Initiatives Joins Staff

After a national search, Janet Rose Trunzo joins Vital Ground as director of conservation initiatives. In this role – an entirely new position at the organization – Janet will be advising Vital Ground to inspire wildlife and conservation enthusiasts and major donors to help secure the future of North America’s iconic grizzly bear populations.

"Joining Vital Ground is both an honor and a significant challenge," she said. "The challenge always, is connecting our supporters, partners, members and friends, with ongoing support for initiatives and projects that help us protect the grizzly and the landscapes that the bear relies upon. It is only through on-the-ground action and acquisition of critical habitat that we can ensure the bears’ future and that of many other species that depend upon grizzly range."

Throughout her career, Janet has been passionate about and committed to wildlife conservation. For the past three years, she has been senior director of development and conservation initiatives for the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium, focusing on the connection between saving wildlife, raising awareness of wildlife issues, conservation education, and building financial support for these efforts. Leading a $30+ million capital campaign, Jan recently secured a record $9 million grant for the Zoo’s Conservation Programs, from the Richard King Mellon Foundation. Previously, Janet was director of conservation communications for the International Field Programs of the Wildlife Conservation Society, NY Zoological Society, and prior to that was an investigative broadcast journalist, specializing in the wildlife and environmental fields. Twenty years a Montanan, Janet also served as executive director of several Montana non-profits.

In addition to wildlife conservation, Janet has a great love for horses, equine rescue and adoption, and serving on the board of CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, an organization that advocates on behalf of children who are victims of neglect or abuse and come to the attention of the court system. But she says her greatest accomplishments are her two wonderful daughters, Kara and Morissa.
North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Restoration Report Available

The National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in June released a report analyzing public comments received during the first phase of an environmental impact statement (EIS) for grizzly bear restoration in the North Cascades.

The EIS is a three-year process to determine a range of actions to restore grizzly bears to the North Cascades ecosystem, a 9,800 square-mile area of largely federal lands in north central Washington state.

FWS listed the grizzly bear as a threatened species in the Lower 48 states in 1975. The species was listed as endangered by the state of Washington in 1980. The EIS is being developed jointly by the FWS, which administers the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Forest Service and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife are cooperating agencies in the process.

The NPS and FWS held a series of public meetings from Feb. 13 through March 26 in which they shared information and solicited public input on issues related to grizzlies and the North Cascades ecosystem. Comments were also accepted by postal mail, online, and in person at North Cascades National Park. The summary of some 3,000 individual comments can be used by the agencies to identify key issues during development of a range of alternatives to address grizzly recovery.

A draft Environmental Impact Statement containing the proposed alternatives will be released in summer 2016 and another public comment period will follow. The analysis report and other documents can be found at http://go.usa.gov/3PZMG.

—IGBC Executive Committee

Editor's Note: Vital Ground fully supports all efforts to restore grizzly bears to the North Cascades Ecosystem. See Vital Ground’s scoping comment under the “News & Media” tab at www.VitalGround.org.
Anniversary Celebrations Held in Chicago, Missoula, Park City

Supporters, trustees and friends kicked off Vital Ground’s 25th anniversary celebration on May 8 at the Seven Seas Dolphinarium at the Chicago Zoological Society’s Brookfield Zoo to commemorate two-and-a-half decades of successful conservation of grizzly country.

With the help of generous donors, supporters and partners, Vital Ground has helped to enhance, restore and conserve more than 610,000 acres of grizzly bear habitat from Yellowstone to Alaska, an incredible step towards connecting crucial landscapes that once belonged to wild grizzlies and other sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species.

The Chicago-area celebration was held in conjunction with Vital Ground’s spring board of trustees’ meeting in Brookfield, Ill. While dolphins swam about, hors d’oeuvres and refreshments were served and Vital Ground debuted its 25th anniversary video. During the evening, $31,600 was raised from generous individuals, the Chicago Zoological Society, and the American Association of Zoo Keepers. Proceeds from the Chicago event will benefit wildlife throughout the northern Rocky Mountain region.

The Missoula event was held September 2 at Fort Missoula’s Heritage Hall, which is downstairs from Vital Ground’s headquarters. Many from the Missoula-area’s conservation community attended, and several individuals traveled from out of state to celebrate. Food and beverages were served with music provided by the band “Uplanders.” Vital Ground’s
former Executive Director Gary Wolfe was recognized for 10-plus years of outstanding service to the organization.

The Park City celebration was held one month later, on October 2, in conjunction with Vital Ground’s fall board of trustees’ meeting. The evening included a formal sit-down dinner at Park City’s Riverhorse Restaurant. Live and silent auctions included artwork and outdoors vacations featuring sailing, skiing, fly-fishing, horse riding and more. Doug and Lynne Seus, who attended the event, offered three “Bart the Bear Day” live auction items, which garnered $18,500 each. The successful bidders will each spend a day with the Seuses and Bart. Including the Bart the Bear 25th Anniversary Memorial Challenge issued by Doug and Lynne that evening, just over 100 attendees generated a net commitment to the Great Bear totaling $264,525.

Now in the fourth quarter of the year, more than ever we need your help to achieve Vital Ground’s $1.5 million fundraising goal. See the executive director’s appeal on page 2. Vital Ground’s staff and board of trustees extend their deepest gratitude and thanks to our supporters for raising funds to further Vital Ground’s mission. We – and especially bears and other wildlife – very much appreciate it!
**Protecting the Right Places / 1990 - 2015**

Vital Ground's Elk Flats Neighbors Project includes five permanent conservation easements and one acquisition totaling 318 acres in Montana's upper Swan Valley in the heart of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, where moose, whitetail and mule deer, Canada lynx and grizzly bears roam.

Located just west of Priest Lake, Bismark Meadows is Vital Ground's hallmark project in north Idaho. Four acquisitions have aggregated 483 acres of excellent spring wetland – crucial grizzly bear habitat in the Selkirk Ecosystem.

Vital Ground's Yaak Mountain property includes lush meadows, hills and forest lands providing important habitat for grizzlies and other wildlife near the Canada-U.S. border northwest of Troy, Mont. Vital Ground has helped enhance, restore and conserve more than 2,000 acres in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, including 71 acres here.

Vital Ground provided a grant to Western Rivers Conservancy toward the purchase of 1,000 acres of corridor wildlife habitat around Bennett Meadows in the Selkirk Ecosystem in the northeastern corner of Washington – Vital Ground's first partnership project in the state.

Since 2003, Vital Ground has provided grants to the National Wildlife Federation to help fund buyouts of sheep and cattle grazing allotments spanning more than 400,000 acres in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, particularly in areas where domestic animals experience chronic conflicts with grizzly bears.
JUST ADD WATER
Planned Giving Made Simple

The answer is yes... and, well, no...

Planned giving is a deeply personal decision for everyone, and where one direction may work for some, it simply isn’t a good fit for others.

There is a Planned Giving Manual by Bryan Clontz titled Just Add Water. It’s full of information you might expect on the many ways to give and is well written and thorough.

I found the title fascinating, and while the following bits of information are more on the topic of ways to give, Just Add Water brings up a deeper meaning for giving: When you give to Vital Ground, you help us to grow our mission, helping the organization to thrive in what can be a tough climate. Giving – truly is "Just Adding) Water."

Planned giving is absolutely visionary. We all want to see a future that will benefit the next generation. What greater return on your investment than to know that your gift will help ensure grizzly bears and wild animals that share the land can survive, and thrive, for years to come?

There are many ways you can leave a legacy to sustain Vital Ground's mission while providing yourself and your family with potential tax savings.

Some of the simplest and most common ways to give are through your will or life insurance policy. Adding Vital Ground as a beneficiary in either of these ways can provide valuable income tax and estate tax savings. You can also designate Vital Ground as a beneficiary of your 401(k), IRA or Pension Plan. There are a number of benefits, and we would be happy to discuss these with you in detail.

Are you considering selling stocks, mutual funds, or real estate? Donations of these types of assets may provide not only significant tax savings, but may also eliminate capital gains taxes. This could allow a substantially higher gift for the same out-of-pocket expense.

And then there's the alphabet soup of planned giving: CRATs (Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust), and CGAs (Charitable Gift Annuity). Gifts such as these can give you a guaranteed stream of income for life while reducing your taxes now.

Planned gifts can offer you many advantages and can help Vital Ground continue to do what we set out to do 25 years ago – to help wild grizzlies in their struggle for survival by protecting their habitat.

The Vital Ground Foundation's Development Department would be pleased to discuss some long-term planning ideas with you and your financial or tax advisor to establish the type of giving that will fit your financial goals. Any communication with you is strictly confidential and without obligation. For more information, please contact us at 406-549-8860, or info@vitalground.org. 

Be part of our mission – Just Add Water!!

—Shannon Drye
Bad Year for Northwest Bears

It's turning out to be a catastrophic year for bears in the northern Rockies. From Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks and north through the "Crown of the Continent" region of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Glacier National Park and into British Columbia, Canada — both grizzlies and black bears have perished due to drought and drying up of natural foods. Recent headlines tell part of the story:

**Bears 'Pour Down' on Western Montana Valleys for Apples, Berries**

**Hungry Bears Perishing on Western Montana Highways**

**People Killing Grizzly Bears at Alarming Rate**

**Fish, Wildlife and Parks Investigating Grizzly Bear Deaths in Montana**

Bear biologists and managers who work to save bears say winter can't come soon enough to protect ursines from further demise as record-breaking, 100-degree heat came early and persisted throughout summer, which brought bears in close contact with people for an extended portion of the season.

Jamie Jonkel, bear management specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, told the Missoulian that many have been hit by autos. "It's unbelievable," Jonkel said. "Every fall we get a lot of road-killed black bear and a few grizzlies. This year is worse."

Region-wide wildfires and tinder-dry conditions caused berries and soft vegetation to dry-up early. Black bears, in particular, meandered into towns searching for apples and birdseed and have proved pesky with chickens, bee hives and garbage. In September alone, seven black bears were killed on Interstate 90 east of Missoula, Mont. And two grizzly cubs died on the highway in the Blackfoot Valley, northeast of the city, where Vital Ground is active with projects.

Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team leader Frank van Manen, who works in the Yellowstone region, told The Jackson Hole News & Guide that the low food year has contributed to increased mortalities, with 46 grizzly bears recorded dead as of October 21, which is more than double the number of deaths recorded in each of the previous two years.

Despite dryness and poor forage conditions, protecting habitat is the long-term solution. Focusing on private lands that serve as connections between grizzly ecosystems, Vital Ground works to protect, restore and conserve special foraging areas and seasonal wildlife habitat. One example is Vital Ground's Alvord Lake Community Forest Project near Troy, Mont., which is in the Fall 2014 issue of Vital News. Vital Ground also works to help reduce conflicts between bears and humans by encouraging and supporting "bear aware" projects and communities. More about that on page 4.

Bear Poacher Loses Hunting Privileges for Life

**Judge Orders $4,500 Paid to Vital Ground**

James Harrison of Darby, Mont., lost hunting privileges in Montana for life at a sentencing hearing in August for poaching black bears in Montana. Harrison was required to pay $9,000 in restitution to the state for killing nine bears and also ordered to donate $4,500 to Vital Ground and $4,500 to the Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation. The judge allowed Harrison to contribute to each conservation organization rather than serve time in jail due to physical and financial hardships. Harrison will also be required to spend 180 hours in hunter education classes, informing youths of consequences for breaking the law.

Vital Ground donor Fred Weisbecker attended the sentencing hearing and informed the judge about Vital Ground's work on behalf of bears, which was instrumental in securing the donation.

Andrea Nasi, member of Vital Ground's Advisory Council, also made a matching donation of $4,500 designated to Vital Ground from the poaching-sentencing decision.

The restitution and donation will be repurposed by Vital Ground for bear researchers to study methods to reduce conflicts between bears and humans.
In the Land of the Pizzly

As Arctic Melts, Polar and Grizzly Bears Mate

By Laura Höflinger

The melting Arctic ice has brought polar bears and grizzly bears together and their hybrid offspring, known as "pizzlies," have been detected on Canadian islands. It is a trend that is happening with other species as well, and scientists are worried because it poses a risk to biodiversity.

Two students from the University of Alberta, flying across the Arctic ice in a helicopter, were startled by what they saw below: a white dot and a brown dot on the ice. The biologists soon realized it was a grizzly bear next to a polar bear. The sighting was on Victoria Island, 500 kilometers (313 miles) from grizzlies' normal habitat on the Canadian mainland.

The polar bear also struck them as a little strange. It had a dark stripe on its back, its snout looked dirty, its head was noticeably larger than normal, and there was a hump behind its shoulders, which is normally found only on brown bears. The paws looked as if the animal was wearing socks. The students had discovered a strange hybrid that goes by various names: grolar bear, pizzly or Nanuk, a combination of the two Inuit words for the animals' parents: polar bear (Nanuk) and grizzly (Aklak).

Two days later, on April 25, they spotted another strange-looking animal, probably also a hybrid. They also saw two other grizzlies. One was so fat that they believed it was feeding on seals, as polar bears do. Brown bears occasionally stray far north. But it's unusual for them to stay there, and it's even more unusual to find them mating with polar bears.

There have been hybrids in zoos, but their existence in the wild had for a long time only been speculated about. It isn't as if polar bears and brown bears never came into contact with one another, but their encounters were usually of the aggressive kind. In 2006, an American hunter shot an unusual-looking polar bear on Nelson Head, a cape in Canada's Northwest Territories.

DNA analysis established that the animal was the first recorded pizzly found in the wild. Another bear was shot on Victoria Island in 2010. This time it was an even greater sensation, because the animal was the offspring of a hybrid bear, which meant that it was already a second-generation pizzly.

Very Distant Relations

The polar bear and the brown bear are considered to be two different species and, therefore, should not be capable of producing viable offspring. But the polar bear emerged as an offshoot from the bloodline of the brown bear only 600,000 years ago. Thus, in a sense the polar bear is basically a white brown bear. Five hybrids have been reported to date, all living on the archipelago surrounding Victoria Island. A small group of grizzlies have settled there, says Andrew Derocher, the two students' professor. The bears probably got there while pursuing reindeer in the winter, when the ice was frozen. When the ice melted in the summer, they stayed on the islands. They can find everything they need there, and the summers are also getting longer.

Scientists expect that climate change and environmental degradation will result in more hybrids in the future. The melting of polar ice is increasingly forcing polar bears onto dry land, while road construction and mining in southern Canada are pushing grizzlies north. This summer marked the most drastic melting of Arctic sea ice to date. Biologists fear that this will promote the development of hybrids. A 2010 essay in the journal Nature counted 34
species that could be affected. Populations whose habitats have been separated by masses of ice could interbreed: belugas with narwhals, lirgha seals with common seals, Greenland whales with North Pacific right whales.

**Threat to Wildlife**

"Hybridization will endanger polar biodiversity," the authors wrote. But why should it be unnatural for polar and brown bears to mate, merely because one species is white and the other brown? Hybrids are not unknown in nature. For instance, a finback and blue whale hybrid was caught that had been impregnated by a blue whale.

But scientists argue that the frequency of such hybridization is disconcerting. It's as if two groups had long been living separately, but in adjacent rooms, and suddenly man came along and pushed open the door between them. In the end, it's conceivable that only hybrids will survive. This is currently happening with coyotes and wolves in North America, as well as between two types of flying squirrel.

Another problem is that if offspring are infertile, the animals are expending unnecessary energy in raising their young without passing on their genes. For example, in the case of North Pacific right whales, whose numbers have dwindled to only 200, it would spell the extinction of the species. It is true that in evolution, not every mistake is necessarily a flaw. But hybrids are usually inferior to their parents, because they are not as well adapted to their environments.

A case in point is that of two hybrids born in a zoo in the northern German city of Osnabrück in 2004. Their coats were caramel-colored, and in many respects they were a combination of their father and mother. They move like polar bears when they catch seals, and yet the hybrids, with their shortened necks, are less proficient swimmers, and their long claws are poorly suited to ice. Canadian scientist Derocher doesn't believe that the pizzles pose a threat to polar bears, because they are still too rare. Besides, he says, they are exposed to a unique kind of threat: Hybrids are not a protected species, because they are not considered polar bears. For hunters, on the other hand, their rarity makes them an especially coveted trophy. 🐻

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**Editor's note:** Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan. ©Der Spiegel.

---Pizzly artwork by William Gamradt

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**REMEMBER...grizzly bears need your help.**

- **Grizzly bears** need your help
  - **$1,500,000**
  - **$1,083,000**
  - **72%**

Funds raised will be used to conserve wildlife habitat and to support Vital Ground’s continuing work on behalf of grizzly bear populations.

Raised & Pledged as of November 1, 2015

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Background photo by Larry Kaufman
If a countryside can still support grizzlies, it will be good and whole and rich and wild and free enough to support all the other creatures struggling to hold on to a place in this world.

**Men’s Vital Ground Overshirt**

Made with 100% recycled fibers. For every overshirt purchased, you are directly preventing 2.4 pounds of textile material from going into landfills!

$34.95

**New Wood Miniature Canoe Paddle Ornament**

Features painted Adirondack details and Bear paw track. Measures 11” long and hangs by jute rope.

$8.50/each

**Grizzly Bear Front Paw Cast**

Suitable for hanging on the wall or a unique coffee table artifact. 100% hand-made. Print by Thorsen Gallery, Bigfork, Montana.

$44.00

To view our full line of merchandise and fine art, please visit Bear Mart online at www.vitalground.org.

No computer? No problem. Give us a call at 406-549-8650 and we will be happy to send you a merchandise flyer.

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**Contact Us**

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Missoula, MT 59804

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(406) 549-3787 (Fax)

info@vitalground.org
www.vitalground.org

Has your email or mailing address changed? Please let us know!

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**The Vital Ground Foundation’s mission** is to protect and restore North America’s grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat for future generations. In support of this mission, we:

- Protect lands that grizzlies need to survive, not only for bears but for all other species that share their world;
- Work where private lands and human impacts meet some of the wildest places left on the continent;
- Target projects that conserve critical lands, sustain habitat connections, and reduce conflicts between bears and people;
- Ground our projects on current science and strong collaborative partnerships.

Please join us! As a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit, our success depends on you!

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