THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION | SPRING 2024

VITAL NEWS

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

GRIZZLY BEARS POISED FOR RETURN TO NORTH CASCADES

Grizzly bear recovery reverberated across national media and conversations on the landscape alike last month. In late April, the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced their joint decision to actively restore a grizzly population to the North Cascades Ecosystem of Washington state. After a half-decade of stop-and-start reintroduction proposals, environmental analyses, public comments and widespread debate, the agencies will begin to move 3-7 grizzlies per year into the North Cascades from other populations in the Lower 48. They aim to establish an initial population of 25 bears that will carry the federal management designation of a nonessential experimental population, with the long-term goal of natural population growth to around 200 grizzlies.

By supporting Vital Ground's engagement in public comment periods and our ongoing education and coexistence partnerships in the North Cascades, you helped enable this landmark moment in grizzly recovery. ***Read more on p. 10,*** and thank you for all you do to support conservation!

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Photo: North Cascades backcountry, by Matt Hart

VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION

A Return with Great Potential—for Grizzlies and for Vital Ground

The decision is in and a plan to actively return grizzly bears to the North Cascades Ecosystem in Washington state is moving forward. The associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process leading to this point confirmed widespread public backing for the decision: Sources including an independent survey place bipartisan support for active recovery efforts above 80 percent—levels any politician or issues pollster can only dream about.

Clockwise from left: Vital Ground board chair Kelly Johnson, exectuive director Ryan Lutey and co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus at our April gathering in Heber City, Utah. When Doug and Lynne founded Vital Ground in 1990, grizzly numbers in the Lower 48 stood at barely half their current level. Now those recovering populations will serve as the source for a restored grizzly presence in the North Cascades Ecosystem, and perhaps the Bitterroot. How far the Great Bear's recovery has come thanks to conservationists like you!

Not to diminish either that support or the years of work by wildlife enthusiasts who helped educate the public about grizzly reintroduction, but this is only the beginning. Similar to the agencies' commitment to restore *and manage* grizzlies in the North Cascades, restoration advocates are now at the very front edge of an implicit commitment to *permanently coexist* with grizzlies as part of the landscape. Now that the agencies are acting on public support for returning this missing icon to the ecosystem, it's time for proponents to double down on habitat conservation, outreach and education and other efforts to prevent potential conflicts between this future bear population and the people who have lived, worked and recreated throughout the ecosystem without grizzlies' presence for decades.

At its annual spring board meeting, Vital Ground trustees reviewed 20 applications from partners in occupied grizzly habitat throughout the Lower 48, and ultimately funded 18 of those requests. And when the dust settled on the board's review, full funding was given to the Methow Valley Conservancy, located in Winthrop, Wash., on the eastern edge of the North Cascades, which is aiming to initiate a bear smart community program in time for the grizzly's comeback.

With a similar analysis to actively restore grizzlies underway in the Bitterroot Ecosystem of central Idaho and western Montana, it looks like Vital Ground's service areas could be dramatically expanding in a very short timeframe. That expansion would certainly stretch the organization's resources on all fronts, but it will simultaneously open innumerable new project and partnership possibilities. We're certain that you—and myriad new potential partners in that expanding area—will help us rise to the challenge of successfully returning grizzlies as a vital component of the natural and cultural heritages of both ecosystems!

Best wishes,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

Near several Vital Ground projects, snow geese congregate at Freezeout Lake along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front during this spring's migration. (Photo: Chelsea Klocke)

Conservation on the Front Range of Coexistence

By Matt Hart

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is a landscape of contrast. Jagged and snow-capped, the mountains the Blackfeet call "The Backbone of the World" rise from the blanket of the Great Plains. The mountains are home to bears and wolverines, to nearly all the wildlife species that called the Mountain West home 200 years ago. The plains are home to farms and ranches, cattle and crops.

The grizzly bear population continues to recover from near-extinction in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem that includes the Rocky Mountain Front. As exploratory grizzlies follow natural urges to seek food, mates and open space, more and more are leaving the mountains, tracing waterways down to the plains that once provided ample habitat for thousands of prairie bears.

More than 100 miles east of the Front Range, last year saw the first returning grizzly documented on the American Prairie Reserve near Malta, Mont. In between, plenty of trouble has occurred as grizzlies wander onto agricultural lands and past communities, sometimes finding an easy meal of spilled grain, chickens or winter-killed cattle. Countless conflicts have also been prevented by landowners utilizing proven mitigation tools like electric fencing, rapid carcass removal and bear-proof sanitation.

Vital Ground supports numerous coexistence efforts through partner grants up and down the Front (read about one on p. 12), but habitat protection is crucial to keeping grizzlies out of trouble here, too. While eastbound bears may not directly impact regional connectivity for the species, they are pioneers on the landscape of social tolerance. Open space and fewer conflicts for them means broader acceptance of grizzlies across their range.

Through a Vital Ground conservation easement, Glen Willow Ranch near Choteau, Mont., protects 650 acres along a Teton River tributary. Farther down the same tributary and through its confluence with the Teton, Vital Ground and a ranching family continue progress on a nearly 4,500-acre conservation agreement through the USDA Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. Another ALE project farther north along the Front remains earlier in the federal review process, with the potential to conserve a similarly-sized mix of riparian habitat and agricultural land.

Beyond these ALE projects—which would become our largest conservation easements—mulitple developing partnerships on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation carry the chance to protect both habitat and access to long-standing sites of cultural importance for tribal members.

For people and grizzlies alike, the Front can be a stage for reconciliation, between cultures and species carrying the weight of historical persecutions. Thanks to supporters like you, Vital Ground is able to step forward as a leader in this fertile place for healing, with ambitious collaborative energy to match the region's rapid pace of change.

See the view from the Front via our "Prairie Grizzlies" video at ***youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly***

THE BORDER CORRIDOR

VITAL GROUND AND Y2Y EXPAND HABITAT PROTECTIONS IN THE IDAHO PANHANDLE

Photo: Kootenai Valley by Kali Becher

By Matt Hart

Grizzly bear recovery in the Lower 48 states often focuses on the two largest bear populations south of Canada, those in and around Glacier and Yellowstone national parks. But in Montana's northwestern corner and the northernmost reaches of the Idaho Panhandle, the Lower 48's two smallest groups of grizzlies cling to a tenuous future. The Kootenai River Valley plays a major role in their conservation prospects.

Splitting the Purcell, Cabinet and Selkirk ranges, the Kootenai River flows west through the northwestern corner of Montana then turns north in the Idaho Panhandle, carving a wide valley on its way into Canada. For over 20 years, Vital Ground has protected key pieces of private land in this valley, helping grizzlies, moose, elk, wolves and much more move between the Selkirk Mountains to the west and the Purcell Mountains to the east.

That rich diversity of life will benefit from Vital Ground's final habitat protection project of 2023, which saw the organization complete the acquisition of 98 acres in far northern Idaho, just south of the Canadian border.

With major project support from the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), the acreage in the Smith Creek drainage lies within a mile of several other Vital Ground project sites as well as state and national forestlands and the Boundary-Smith Creek Wildlife Management Area, further solidifying an open movement corridor across the valley for wildlife against the backdrop of relentless development pressure across the region.

"Working with Vital Ground and willing landowners to conserve lands like this 98-acre property is both strategic and critical," says Eric Greenwell, Y2Y's Senior Connectivity Specialist. "This particular property's value to wildlife is two-fold: Not only does it sit between the Purcells, Cabinets and Selkirks in the larger landscape, it connects national forest to incredible habitat in the Boundary-Smith Creek Wildlife Management Area and along the Kootenai River, where Y2Y has made significant restoration and climate adaptation investments through our Bees to Bears Project, compounding benefits to wildlife and building on the remarkable work of great partners."

THE SLOW PATH TO GRIZZLY RECOVERY

Biologists estimate a population of 50-60 grizzlies endures in the southern portion of the Selkirk Ecosystem, navigating the borderlands between Idaho, northeastern Washington and British Columbia. Across the Kootenai Valley, the Purcell Mountains descend from Canada to form part of the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, home to another group of 50-60 grizzly bears.

With only a handful of documented cases of gene

flow between these populations, maintaining habitat connectivity is crucial to avoiding a future of genetic isolation and eventual extinction for these grizzlies. And with development pressure high across the region, protecting private lands in key corridors is an essential prong in allowing the populations to slowly grow, connect and diversify.

"There's constant pressure to divide and develop land," says Greg Johnson, a retired biologist for Idaho Fish and Game who worked on grizzly recovery in northern Idaho for multiple decades. "Where Vital Ground has their most important role is to take on the smaller projects in those really key critical areas. The lower elevations are bottlenecks for key species like grizzly bear. The number one threat is the permanent loss of those habitats."

WIDE-REACHING BENEFITS

Known as 100-Acre Wood, Vital Ground's newly-acquired property features mixed conifer forest, with a seasonal creek running through the acreage. As part of Vital Ground's One Landscape conservation strategy, several bear biologists and managers noted the property and surrounding area for its connectivity value and high-quality seasonal habitat for grizzlies.

Under Vital Ground ownership, the property will be protected from subdivision in perpetuity and stewarded to maximize its habitat value for the region's broad diversity

of wildlife, from bears to migratory birds to rare sensitive species including Canada lynx and wolverine.

Furthering Vital Ground's larger One Landscape Initiative, the project combines with other habitat protection efforts in northern Idaho and the Montana portion of the Kootenai Valley to create a more connected landscape for the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak's recovering grizzlies. In the face of development pressures, it also maintains the rural and scenic nature of one of the wildest portions of the Mountain West that doesn't include a national park or large protected wilderness area.

"North Idaho, just like a lot of the West, is facing a surge in population growth and subsequent development pressure," says Mitch Doherty, conservation director for Vital Ground. "This particular area near the Canadian border is remote, rugged and some of the most spectacular country in the Northern Rockies. This project will retain that ruggedness and beauty that the longtime residents cherish and wildlife needs."

Additional support for the 100-Acre Wood project came from Atira Conservation, the McDanel Land Foundation and individual contributors like you.

A Western red cedar grove provides rich habitat on the conserved 100-Acre Wood property. (Photo: Mitch Doherty)

John Tiedemann with a California Scrub Jay at Cal Poly, where he works as a custodian and collects spare change for wildlife conservation. (Photo: Rachel Arabia/Mustang News)

SMALL CHANGE, BIG IMPACT

MEET JOHN TIEDEMANN, A BEAR LOVER WITH A UNIQUE WAY OF HELPING WILDLIFE

By Kayla Heinze

At first glance, couch cushions and city sidewalks might not seem like important locations for grizzly bear conservation. But it is in these places that John Tiedemann makes an impact from far away for the fierce mountains and gentle river valleys of our beloved Northern Rockies.

A longtime Vital Ground supporter and lifelong animal lover, John refers to his collecting efforts as "spare change for bear range." When he started working as a custodian in the first-year dorms of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 13 years ago, he decided to donate all the coins he found left behind after students moved out for the summer. It became a habit.

"I'm always looking for change now," John said. "I collect it in a jar on my dresser."

Growing up in California, John found that animals, including childhood dogs and backyard wildlife, struck a chord with him. Now, at his home in San Luis Obispo that butts up against the hills, he cherishes the deer, squirrels, blue jays, skunks and more that make up his local wildlife community. A self-described "big softie," John said he often watches videos of bear cubs playing during his lunch breaks.

The special affection John has for bears and all animals was palpable when I spoke with him over the phone. He movingly recounted a time he watched a black bear sow grieve her cub after it was hit by a car.

"That's me in a nutshell," John said. "I have so much love for them. It hurts me when I see their territory slipping away. Nobody asked them if it's okay."

A LITTLE GOING A LONG WAY FOR WILDLIFE

John said he appreciates Vital Ground's work

protecting habitat in the face of development and our strategic efforts to connect bear populations so they stay genetically diverse and healthy. On the California landscapes he knows well, mountain lions have faced similar habitat loss and genetic isolation. In the face of these threats, John balances confronting the immensity of the problems with the concreteness of his contributions.

"I've always wanted to do more," John said. "But every time I read an article about a different piece of property being procured I take pride in the fact that I helped a little bit."

John said he knows every contribution has an impact. While the coins he collects are small, left behind by others as worthless change, his never-ending hunt adds up to something significant. Consistent support over the years from donors like John has allowed Vital Ground to surpass ambitious milestones like protecting and enhancing over 1 million acres through our habitat protection projects and conflict prevention partnerships.

Whether you're new to our conservation community or a longtime bit-by-bit contributor like John, when we all chip in it turns out those small coins hiding in the couch can in fact do a lot for bears.

"It's kind of like treasure," John said. "A little bit of change in the right direction can change the world. If we can do it for one animal it's worth it."

Make a difference for wildlife today!

Jamie Scarrow

Want to do more to support habitat protection but not sure how? Here are two great ways to contribute:

- ***Set up a monthly giving plan:*** *Even a small amount every month goes a long way to sustaining our work for wildlife throughout the year. Start now at* ***give.vitalground.org/recurring.***
- ***Create a conservation legacy:*** *Accomplish a big life task and champion wildlife for generations to come by using our free will-writing resource. Learn more at* ***vitalground.org/legacy.*** *Thank you!*

An Inside Look at UDAP's World of Bear Spray

By Kim Davitt, Development Director

It's not every day that you get to see how the sausage is made. Or to be more accurate—how the bear spray is made. Working in wildlife conservation brings us to all kinds of interesting places, but usually outside in a field or forest, not a factory. It was unique and special, therefore, to visit with our partners at UDAP Bear Spray last year and tour their facilities in Butte, Mont.

Located just a couple of hours from the recreation and grizzly hub of Yellowstone National Park, UDAP's facilities are a good reminder of what it takes to stay safe in bear country. And a good reminder of how many different people and products contribute to that goal.

UDAP is one of Vital Ground's business partners. In addition to donating a portion of their proceeds to our habitat protection efforts, UDAP also contributes to coexistence efforts by manufacturing the world's hottest pepper spray, giving recreators in bear country an effective and nonlethal self-defense option.

Celebrating 30 years in business, the company, founded in 1994 and a supporter of our conservation work since 2021, knows firsthand the importance of this tool. Its founder, Mark Matheny, survived a grizzly attack thanks to a friend who finally deterred the bear using a small can of personal pepper spray. The harrowing experience stuck with Mark, eventually leading him to found UDAP to make improvements to the sprays and holsters available at the time, including adding a tie to the safety clip and designing holsters that allow for a faster discharge.

As we saw on our visit, the company is still committed to this goal. Under the leadership of Mark and UDAP's general manager, Tim Lynch, their team continues to expand distribution, both to major retailers and local stores across the US, while also investing in more sustainable

packaging. Sent along with each bear spray order, UDAP includes a 32-page UDAP Bear Safety Tips booklet along with a pamphlet co-designed with Vital Ground to educate customers about grizzly conservation and conflict prevention.

In his 23 years with the company, Tim said he has seen a lot of growth. As UDAP's website explains, "There are more people than ever recreating, hunting, fishing, and enjoying the wild lands of North America and elsewhere around the globe … With bear populations on the rise, the need for a reliable and effective bear deterrent is as important as ever."

UDAP effectively meets this need. Their employee-built warehouse-style buildings host an incredibly sophisticated assembly line, allowing their small team to push out astonishing amounts of product. The process surprisingly evoked memories of my summer job at a winery—fill the container, force on a lid, label and repeat.

A VITAL TOOL IN THE CONSERVATION BOX

Like appreciating fine wine, there are important considerations to using bear spray properly that are not always common knowledge. For instance, bear sprays generally expire after four to five years and each brand performs in slightly different ways. UDAP's high-volume sprays are designed for short powerful bursts, not the six-second deployment of some other brands.

"Unfortunately, there is an ever-increasing amount of conflicting information about the proper use of bear spray," says UDAP. "It is critically important to recognize that not all bear spray products perform in exactly the same manner."

This is why UDAP commits itself as heartily to bear safety education as it does to producing its array of sprays and accessory products. Reading the specific use instructions on the label and then practicing help ensure you will be prepared to effectively use the spray in the unlikely case of a bear attack.

At its core, UDAP and many of our other partners recognize that living and recreating in bear country comes with risk but that those real dangers should not stop us from enjoying these beautiful places or from protecting the right of grizzlies to share this landscape with us.

As we together innovate and collaborate toward increased coexistence, our collection of tools is growing and improving. From electric fences and drones to range riders and livestock guardian dogs and, of course, bear sprays like UDAPs, residents and visitors to grizzly country are not alone or unequipped to protect both themselves and wildlife.

The reality of this work is rarely extraordinary. It is often the small, mundane and daily acts that cumulatively build a buffer so every person and animal on this landscape can have the space they need to live and thrive. In UDAP's factory their contribution is the repetitive fill, force and label, as well as a deep commitment to spreading bear awareness, that empowers their customers to make our shared landscapes safer.

After my August visit, I headed out on my annual solo backpacking trip. I attached my UDAP container to the chest strap of my backpack and felt secure enough to travel into a wild, unknown landscape.

Grizzlies on Track for Return to North Cascades Ecosystem

By Kayla Heinze

The last time biologists confirmed a grizzly bear's presence in the North Cascades Ecosystem it was 1996 and I was not yet born. Now, after nearly 30 years, the National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have announced they will actively restore a population of grizzlies to this designated recovery zone. This historic moment comes as the review process also begins for potential grizzly reintroduction to the Bitterroot Ecosystem, with agency officials currently drafting an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) assessing different options for that recovery.

Both the North Cascades and Bitterroots are designated grizzly recovery zones without a resident grizzly population. Both feature expansive wilderness areas that provide ample habitat for grizzlies. And the bears give back: their presence on the landscape supports healthy plant communities and balances other wildlife populations.

As the only region outside the Northern Rockies designated for grizzly recovery, Vital Ground wrote in a public comment that the North Cascades Ecosystem "offers a singular and irreplaceable opportunity to return the grizzly as a vital link in the nation's wildlife heritage."

People once killed and eradicated grizzlies from the North Cascades, and now people are going to bring them back. Agency officials plan to transfer three to seven grizzlies into the ecosystem from existing populations each year until an initial population of 25 individuals is established. Beyond that, additional translocations will be considered to supplement the population, ultimately aiming for 200 individuals.

For those with deep roots among these ancient conifer forests and rushing glacial rivers, the return of bears also enables a return to relationship. "The tribe's history, culture and identity is so intertwined with Grizzly Bears and the [North Cascades Ecosystem] that it is impossible to separate them," Marilyn Scott, vice chair of the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe, wrote in a public comment.

Support is not ubiquitous, however. Some tribes in the area that rely heavily on vulnerable salmon populations, as well as recreationists and ranchers, are concerned about the impact of grizzlies on their ways of life. After considering over 12,000 public comments, the NPS and USFWS decided to designate the North Cascades grizzlies as a 10(j) nonessential experimental population. This gives managers broader leeway and additional tools to prevent conflicts and promote coexistence as people in the region learn to live alongside grizzlies once again.

Vital Ground has invested in several partnerships to support and prepare local communities for this moment. Most recently, we awarded a partner grant to Methow Valley Bear Aware for implementing electric fencing, bear-proof sanitation and other coexistence tools in communities along the eastern side of the ecosystem. (A full announcement of 2024 partner grant recipients is forthcoming in the fall newsletter and on vitalground.org.)

As grizzlies return, we will have even more reason to expand our education and conflict-prevention efforts in Washington state. Your support, and ongoing engagement with the public comment process, is helping make restoration of this iconic and ecologically important species a reality. It is possible that within my lifetime all six of the designated recovery zones will be home to thriving populations of grizzlies, thanks to our collective commitment to conservation. Keep an eye on our blog at ***vitalground.org/news*** and our monthly email newsletter for updates on the Bitterroot EIS process and other stories from across our expanding grizzly country.

Philip DeManczuk

Vital Ground Welcomes Two New Trustees to Board

As grizzly populations continue to recover and expand, Vital Ground's conservation work is matching their pace. Our Board of Trustees provides the foundational guidance and support that launches these efforts, and we're thrilled to see the board grow once again this year with the additions of Cheri Cooley-Hick and Ken Hick.

Cheri and Ken reside in the Portland, Ore., area and have long championed numerous environmental and animal-related causes. After several years getting to know Vital Ground as donors, Ken served as an advisor to the board's Development Committee last year and led our special Big Bear Blend wine release as part of the 2023 end-of-year Bart the Bear Memorial Campaign. Now we're excited to welcome both Cheri and Ken as trustees, with each bringing fresh energy for conservation and deep philanthropic experience to the board.

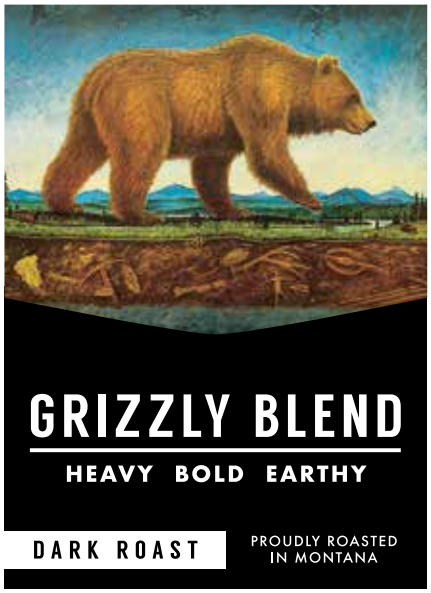
Cheri worked in development for the Oregon Ballet Theatre and has board experience with Sea Watch, Wildcat Haven, Pink Sisters, Plan it Forward and CASA. She brings a particular expertise and passion for event organizing, having coordinated numerous galas and other major nonprofit fundraisers.

Cheri Cooley-Hick

Ken Hick

After piloting B52s for the Air Force, Ken began a career in business consulting and education, earning an MBA and a Ph.D. in Finance and Economics from the University of Washington. He then taught business classes part-time for several MBA programs while working as a consultant hired to assist companies with business challenges. Over three decades he completed 15 successful "turn-around" assignments and bought and sold eight companies for profit. He has served on and chaired numerous boards, including Progressive Animal Rescue, the Wildcat Haven Foundation, Pacific Development Group, Cascade Investment and Management Group and the Oregon Child Development Coalition Foundation.

Join us in giving a griz-sized welcome to the board to Ken and Cheri!



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Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack
A portion of every pound sold advances Vital Ground habitat protection efforts.
Support wildlife and order online at: ***www.coffeetraders.com***

Partner Study Shows Efficacy of Nonlethal "Scare Devices"

By Kayla Heinze

Removing or securing attractants is usually the most effective way to prevent conflicts between bears and people, but sometimes it's just not possible. Grain spills on the Rocky Mountain Front, also known as Montana's breadbasket, are a prime example. Given the realities and intensity of farming on the Front, it's difficult to entirely avoid, secure or clean up grain spills. These spills provide an enticing food source for the grizzlies expanding eastward back onto their historic prairie habitats, one that brings them into worrying proximity to people.

To support local landowners in coexistence, Vital Ground sponsored a study, published in the Journal of Wildlife Management and led by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Grizzly Bear Management Specialist Wesley Sarmento, on the effectiveness of nonlethal scare devices as a conflict-prevention tool. Over four years, Sarmento deployed audio-visual scare devices near grain spills along with cameras to monitor how bears reacted.

At over half the sites, grizzlies were deterred from accessing attractants, with an overall 46 percent reduction in bears getting grain when a scare device was activated and a further 44 percent reduction for each additional device. Even when bears were not completely deterred, Sarmento observed decreased feeding behavior and increased vigilance and movement by bears. The first study to assess audio-visual devices with bears, these results indicate they are promising for scaring off bears and reducing their use of grain spills. There was no evidence of bears becoming habituated to the combined flash and sound stimuli, though further research would be needed to confirm this observation.

In addition to being nonlethal, these particular scare devices have many practical benefits. They are affordable, widely available, automated and require minimal setup and monitoring. They are also weather-resistant, solar-powered, motion-activated and can be programmed to only operate at night (so as to not become a nuisance to workers). Recognizing the need for a multipronged approach, Sarmento has also helped research the effectiveness of livestock guardian dogs on the Front. Every situation has a unique context that might make one conflict prevention tool preferrable, but scare devices can be a first line of prevention in a range of conditions.

"Scare devices can help keep people and agricultural commodities safe, while also preventing the need for relocations or removals of grizzly bears," Sarmento said. "These devices should be a tool in any wildlife management program, as it is a cost-effective starting point for responding to complaints."

This local investment in coexistence helps address larger conservation concerns. As Sarmento writes in the study, "Real and perceived conflicts are one of the leading causes of wildlife declines globally and can significantly influence human livelihoods. Conserving species that harm people and damage property is a serious sociopolitical challenge."

As a Vital Ground supporter, you enable conflict prevention projects, like this one, that find practical, tangible solutions for both bears and people. Thank you!

Adventure with Vital Ground!

A few spots remain open for our upcoming fall trip to ***Knight Inlet Lodge*** *in coastal British Columbia. Join us!*

- ***When****: October 15-20, 2024*
- ***Where****: Knight Inlet Lodge, an Indigenous-owned ecotourism lodge specializing in bear viewing.*
- ***For more info****: Visit vitalground.org/knight-inlet or contact Kim Davitt, Development Director, at (406) 549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org.*

Happy Birthday, ESA: Landmark Legislation Turns 50

By Kayla Heinze

Fifty years ago, a new law significantly altered the landscape of wildlife conservation in the U.S. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) turned 50 on December 28, 2023, providing an opportunity to reflect on its lasting impacts for species of all kinds, including grizzlies.

After two centuries of willful persecution of wildlife in North America, the ESA formalized into our federal structures a counterforce of conservation. Environmental historian Dan Flores (who gave a webinar for Vital Ground that you can watch online at *youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly*) recently wrote that the ESA, "reversed one of the most disturbing histories of wildlife destruction of any modern nation … expanding the circle of morality."

Under the ESA, grizzly bears were listed as threatened in 1975, with their numbers in the Lower 48 below 700. Threatened species receive a level of protected status one tier below "endangered," but still merit federal protections related to hunting and habitat conservation. Since their initial listing, careful management has allowed grizzlies in the habitat strongholds of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) and the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) to recover significantly, with a combined total of around 2,000 individuals. While the populations remain genetically disconnected, these bears are now exploring beyond their protected cores, returning to historic range on the Great Plains and elsewhere.

In 2017, this positive growth led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to briefly remove the GYE grizzly population from the threatened species list. State agencies received full management authority. Tribes and a coalition of nonprofits challenged the USFWS decision, taking it to court where a federal judge ruled that, despite the increase in sheer numbers, the GYE population still warranted federal protection and management oversight due to the lack of genetic exchange with other populations. This legal chapter extended the ongoing debate about the long-term role of ESA protection, what constitutes species recovery, who should be responsible for bear management and whether delisting is an appropriate step at this point in the grizzly's recovery story.

Bull trout share grizzlies' listing status as a threatened species under the ESA.

As a group dedicated to the grizzly's long-term well-being as a species, Vital Ground closely monitors all decisions, policies and management plans that impact grizzlies on the federal level and in the various states that host or might host grizzlies. We submit public comments situationally but do not take a blanket position on delisting.

Regardless of listing status, natural connectivity will remain an important goal for long-term species stability. That's why Vital Ground dedicates the majority of our focus and resources to permanent habitat protection in key areas. We value the consistency offered by private land conservation that connects larger landscapes. In addition, our community partnerships enable the use of time-tested safety practices and innovative technologies so people can coexist with grizzlies amid time's shifting winds.

The ESA has been, and remains, an important tool for preserving native wildlife and plants. Grizzlies are just one of over 2,000 species protected under the legislation. Many other species are involved in their own complicated recovery situations as our society balances the unique circumstances of climate change, modern management techniques and diverse social and recreational values.

Like the ESA, Vital Ground's efforts ultimately strive for the well-being of multiple species, protecting habitat for an interconnected web of life. We fill our niche and tend to relationships within the broader ecosystem of conservation stakeholders helping shape the future of this landscape.

We know there is no finite end goal for conservation, but rather an ongoing collective journey to love and protect life in all its remarkable and diverse forms and to live with the land in a way that lets that love shine through. Always, but especially in this moment of reflection, we thank you for being with us on the journey.

CHANGING RHYTHMS

WHAT THE CLIMATE CRISIS MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF GRIZZLY CONSERVATION

By Kayla Heinze

Like a beautiful song, the lives of bears rise and fall with a cyclical rhythm. In springtime, grizzlies become active once again after winter denning. Sows with newborns or yearling cubs explore valley bottoms looking for greenery while adults without cubs roam the landscape, perhaps finding each other to mate. As summer berries ripen, bears in all life stages focus more of their energy on foraging. Come fall, the intense hunger called hyperphagia sets in and bears eat incessantly to build up fat stores for winter.

For tens of thousands of years, grizzlies have attuned to the landscape's seasonal availability of foods and evolved in this cyclic existence. Their physiology and behavior are tied to the patterns of their environment, their activity matching the fluctuations of the world around them.

Now, the climate crisis is radically altering these rhythms. While weather and other natural systems are inherently variable, grizzlies have always been able to keep tempo with their dynamic ecosystems and play their part in the larger orchestra of life. But it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep that melody going. Bears and every other wild creature, including us, are struggling without a stable beat. The music isn't just changing this time—for many species, it's at risk of stopping altogether.

Like us, grizzlies are amazingly adaptive, but not endlessly so. With lifestyles so deeply connected to the cycles of the landscape, rapid change makes it hard for this slow-reproducing species to keep up. Climate change is undeniably threatening, but we can give grizzlies, and ourselves, a fighting chance in an uncertain future by protecting the landscapes that we all depend on.

KNOWNS AND UNKNOWNS

The Northern Rockies experienced unusually warm weather and low snowpack levels this winter. Just one manifestation of the increasing average temperatures and extreme weather patterns ahead, this winter will impact the physical and social landscape for months. Based on these dry conditions, experts predict limited huckleberry production this summer. Poor berry crops can drive hungry bears toward other food sources, including those that bring them into closer proximity with people.

But it's not just fewer berries—changing weather patterns are also making berries ripen earlier, before bears enter their peak foraging window. This misalignment is one of the ways the climate crisis is shifting bears out of tune with their surroundings. From declines in Yellowstone's native trout population to the decimation of whitebark pine stands, many of the plants and animals that grizzlies rely on are hurting because of rapid and widespread changes on the landscape. Those hanging on may have to shift their ranges to survive, which could alter where grizzlies go, too.

Whitebark pine has been a major food source for grizzlies in the Northern Rockies, with seeds rich in fat and essential amino acids. Found at high elevations, this nutritious food keeps bears in habitats infrequently visited by people. But whitebarks are suffering the combined effects of fire suppression, drought, heat stress, and beetle outbreaks and fungal infections that were once kept in check by colder winters. As their availability continues to decline, research in Yellowstone indicates bears will switch to a meat-heavier diet, putting them at greater risk for conflict as they approach roadkill or livestock.

We also know that warmer winters can confuse grizzlies about when to enter and exit their dens. Studies show higher temperatures and reduced snowpacks can cause bears to leave dens earlier in the spring, creating a wider window for potential conflicts with people. The heat gets to them during the summer, too. With dense fur and no access to air conditioning, bears must limit their activity when it gets too hot, which is now the case both for more days of the year and for more hours of the day.

But challenges aren't the whole story for opportunistic, adaptable grizzlies. Studies show that certain plant species bears rely on for food may actually expand and grow more abundant in response to warming. Thanks to less-stable global weather patterns, climate change also contributes to freak cold snaps, which can kill deer and elk, increasing carrion for bears in spring. And there are likely many climate-related changes that scientists have yet to predict. With warming, habitat loss, development and other threats all intimately interconnected, the impacts for bears could compound in still-unknown ways.

While we don't know exactly how the climate crisis will play out, especially on local scales, we know enough to worry. Due to its broad effects, many conservationists call climate change the biggest existential challenge for grizzlies. In 2009, a federal judge cited the need to more fully consider climate impacts in her decision to maintain the species' listing status as threatened.

In search of new food sources, on a rapidly developing landscape with more people than ever, bears are at an increased risk of conflicts that harm both them and us. More conflicts, in turn, can decrease social tolerance for grizzlies and weaken support for their protection. While this is a worrying outlook, we have many resources to prevent it. The biggest thing we still don't know about the future though is what we, as a human species, are going to do.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION FOR RESILIENT FUTURES

As author Terry Tempest Williams says, "When I see a grizzly, I see the potential of who we really are." We have the potential to continue wreaking havoc on our shared landscapes or to protect these precious places for the benefit of all life. As a supporter of Vital Ground, you enable us to collectively choose the better path. Your generosity and commitment allow us to counteract the threats to grizzlies and give the species a chance in a changing world.

Bears are highly intelligent, opportunistic creatures capable of remarkable adaptation. But the isolation and low genetic diversity of the Lower 48's grizzly populations limits their potential for adjustment, as does the landscape fragmentation that makes it difficult for bears to move freely to better habitat. Your support of Vital Ground's mission to protect and connect the Northern Rockies' remaining open spaces improves the opportunities for bears to roam safely. Conserving lush wetlands and intact forests helps even further, sequestering carbon and giving the native plants and animals bears rely on a stronghold for survival.

You also help proactively address and prevent conflicts. Through our robust conservation partner program, we are helping local communities cope with the increased potential for conflicts due to climate impacts and expanding bear populations. We prioritize coexistence and habitat protection in recognition that our fates are linked with grizzlies and other wildlife. When bears can thrive in their natural environment, they're less likely to get into trouble with people, and our ecosystems become healthier and more resilient from their presence.

As creatures on a planet in crisis, we're all part of the same choir. Our landscapes are changing with unreliable tempos, and many have suffered already for it. But the song's not over yet. We thank you for your ongoing investment in our conservation work to ensure the beautiful music and natural rhythms of the Northern Rockies can continue unfolding for all to enjoy.

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The Vital Ground Foundation's mission *is to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations for future generations by conserving wildlife habitat, and by supporting programs that reduce conflicts between bears and humans.*

In support of this mission, we:

- Protect habitat that grizzlies need to survive including other species that share their range;
- 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 prevent conflicts between bears and people;
- Ground our projects on current science and strong collaborative partnerships.

As a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit, our success depends on you!
Visit *www.vitalground.org* to donate or become a member.

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Contact us at:
The Vital Ground Foundation
30 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804

(406) 549-8650 (Office)
info@vitalground.org
www.vitalground.org

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