

GUEST COMMENTARY

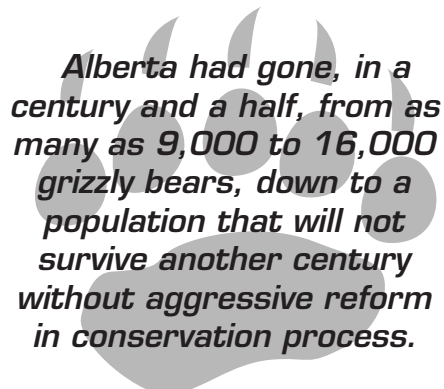
Alberta cries for massive land and wildlife conservation reform

Dr. Brian L. Horejsi

About 20 years ago I wrote a response to what was then Alberta's Grizzly Management plan, pointing out that a hard look at the evidence indicated there existed fewer than 500 grizzly bears in Alberta. Since I began my grizzly bear research in the 1970s I spoke often and widely about critically low grizzly bear numbers. Unlike many Alberta government researchers and land and wildlife managers, I looked world wide for the best available science. Not being blinded by the "Made in Alberta" spin perfected by 30-plus years of the same government, I easily discovered that by the 1980s research into grizzly bear population viability and habitat effectiveness had surged in the U.S. Any honest and competent researcher or manager could have done the same.

The most revealing and seminal research into population viability revealed the close negative link between bear population size and distribution and industrialization like logging and oil and gas exploration and the associated human motorized exploitation of access. Part of the access issue is extremes in human behaviour by armed and intolerant people, behaviour often overlooked by biased wildlife managers. Each passing year the evidence piled up, all of it reinforcing what is really a natural and inescapable conclusion; bears need space and they need security.

I did what an honest government agency should have done. I looked at the land, looked at the massive and unrestricted industrial occupation of grizzly bear habitat, added in the cumulative effects of out of control off road vehicle access, put the killing of bears for defence of livestock into the equation, did not turn a blind eye to



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massive habitat eating real estate deals like the Castle Ski Hill and Seven Sisters and Nakiska, recognized the indefensible concession to hunters of licensed and deliberate killing of bears, and put two and two together, or should I say put 20 plus 20 cumulative effects together. Measured against the best available science, the conclusion was inescapable even back then when some of these impacts were just being unleashed on the landscape; there were 500 or fewer grizzly bears surviving in Alberta. Alberta had gone, in a century and a half, from as many as 9,000 to 16,000 grizzly bears, down to a population that will not survive another century without aggressive reform in conservation process. In an honest regulatory world a 95 per cent decline should have triggered a dramatic response.

Yet Alberta's banal and defensive public land and wildlife management services systematically avoided using the best available science. They did so partly by deliberately excluding public input into land and wildlife management strategies, collaborating closely with industries we thought they were regulating, industries engaged in those very activities that degrade the ecological effectiveness of public land. They ferociously opposed the integration of science and public

input into environmental impact assessment; in fact they belittled or ignored even the process. They stacked advisory committees with people that had a record of subservience to government and they displayed an orchestrated avoidance of independent scientists.

Along the way the Conservative government worked tirelessly to subvert public process and isolate public agencies (like the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife) from public accountability or control. No where has this institutional decay been more clearly revealed than in the recent high profile Royalty Review Report entitled Our Fair Share. While this report addresses billions of dollars lost to Albertans by the Energy Department, the malaise, secrecy, and bias found in the latter department has trickled down to all government departments. The Conservative governments did this partially by privatizing control of fish and wildlife through creation of the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), an organization largely engaged in protecting the perceived entitlement of hunters, who happen to be a distinct minority of Albertans. As a consequence, the government acquiesced to a prolonged extension of bear hunting. Revenues were diverted from Fish and Wildlife to the ACA, leaving the former starving for money and authority.

It is no accident that total control over public lands, on which most bear habitat exists, was handed to the Forest Service. Even though Albertans own public land, the Forest Service has been handmaiden to resource industries for half a century. They have served the extractive users of wildlife habitat well; the destruction and alteration of forested habitat

actually accelerated between 1985 and 2005, increasing by 20,000 ha to over 68,000 ha annually according to Canada's State of the Forests reports. In the 20 years since I first indicated that it is highly probable that there existed only 500 grizzly bears in the province, the oil and gas industry has drilled an estimated 40,000 successful and dry wells in presently occupied or recently lost grizzly bear habitat, access for all of which was rubber stamped by the Forest Service. In just 2003 and 2004, the Energy Utilities Board (EUB), which issues drilling permits without consulting either the Forest or Fish and Wildlife Services, and pointedly requires no environmental impact statement for any well, reported about 4,625 successful oil and gas wells in existing and recently occupied grizzly habitat.

The Forest Service and the EUB conveniently do not keep records of the length or location of roads built into, through and over fish and wildlife habitat. Only estimates are possible, but a kilometre of road per well is not uncommon. Fragmentation, destruction and alienation of grizzly bear habitat has been severe in the face of perhaps 50,000 km of service roads and at least twice that much length of seismic road. Then throw logging into the mix! What we see is ecological wound upon ecological wound, much like Alberta's energy royalty system, labelled by the Royalty Review Panel as "patch upon patch".

Road densities of under one half kilometre of road per square kilometre of land, in a critical combination with 50 per cent of the land base being totally roadless, is necessary to maintain viable grizzly bear populations. Road densities on Alberta's public lands are routinely two to five kilometres of service and seismic road per square kilometre of land, industrialization that is devastating to biological diversity like bears and, not surprisingly, all other wildlife populations.

And what role did our land and wildlife "managers" and researchers play in this collapse of habitat effectiveness, not to mention the province-wide endangerment of biological diversity and subversion of public process? Those that escaped the "budget butchers" cowered in their offices, hoarding what little information they had, systematically avoiding professional and public analysis of the ever growing flood of applications for industrialization, and scrupulously evading testimony at public hearings. They spend thousands of hours robotically approving applications for and planning industrial intrusions for the oil and gas and timber industries, and with virtually no exceptions, take the side of commercial (industrial) users of wildlife habitat when the public does manage to raise a red flag.

The Royalty Review Panel report identifies the structural rot in the Department of Energy that cost Albertans billions of dollars; they identify the deliberate and systematic bias that Albertans have been subjected to for years by a government whose policy and practice is to "look the other way" as long as the oil and gas industry,

and tagalong timber industry, get whatever they want. In this kind of a system where one or two industries have an automatic green light, land and wildlife conservation has been treated as an irritant. Regrettably, elected government and our land and wildlife management organizations and their managers chose to stand with industry, and not with Albertans.

Never before in any so called "advanced" nation have so many public servants failed their ethical, moral and social responsibilities, grovelled along under non existent professional standards, and not only failed to employ, but outright resisted using the best available science. The Ministry responsible for land and wildlife, now known as Sustainable Resource Development, and its employees, deceived Albertans. Their marching orders are and have been to clear the deck for the oil and gas, timber, off road vehicle and agriculture industries, but they have never been honest with Albertans about that conflicting and subversive agenda. That is why there are fewer than 500 grizzly bears in Alberta today, and that is why this pattern of grizzly bear population and habitat decline was established three decades ago.

And now, an epiphany has apparently overcome them and they've suddenly discovered that Alberta has 500 or fewer grizzly bears! The state of Alberta's grizzly bear population and the decrepit state of public lands habitat is only one measure of the public betrayal and professional failure of Alberta's land and wildlife managers. Not only have they been complicit in the destruction of public lands and wildlife populations through collaboration with industries and individuals who have plundered that land, but just as seriously they have defrauded Albertans by pretending that they were protecting our interests. The Royalty Review Panel showed Albertans have been cheated out of billions of dollars of our money by the same government and system that has willingly sold out our natural heritage. It is now time for Albertans and grizzly bears to get their fair share, and that is going to take massive house cleaning reform of land and wildlife management legislation, policies, practices and people. 🐾

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