



North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement



© Steve Rochetta

Background

Situated in the core of the North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE), the North Cascades National Park Service Complex is surrounded by more than 2.6 million contiguous acres of federally designated wilderness, including protected land and de facto wilderness in British Columbia, Canada. The NCE constitutes a large block of contiguous habitat that spans the international border but is isolated from grizzly bear populations in other parts of the United States and Canada.

Grizzly bears have coexisted with people in the NCE from when the first people arrived in North America. This changed during the 19th century with the boom in the fur trade. Nearly 3,800 grizzly bear hides were shipped out of the area's forts in one 25-year period. However, it is unknown how many more grizzly bears were killed by miners and others living and working on the land. As significant mining activity decreased, areas of grizzly bear habitat remained, and in many instances returned to a wilder state. What did not survive was a grizzly bear population capable of returning to its former numbers.

Research indicates this wilderness landscape can support a self-sustaining grizzly bear population. However, the last confirmed sighting of the species in the United States portion of the ecosystem was in 1996. Given the low number of grizzly bears, their very slow reproductive rate, and other recovery constraints, the NCE grizzly bear population is essentially gone.

While survey efforts have resulted in a limited number of detections of grizzly bears in the Canadian portion of the ecosystem in the past few decades, attempts to confirm evidence of grizzly bears or a grizzly bear population in the U.S. portion of NCE have been unsuccessful. Natural recovery in the NCE is challenged by the absence of an existing grizzly bear population, verified reproduction, and isolation from any contiguous populations in Canada and the United States.

In accordance with the NCE Recovery Plan, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) are initiating a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning process as joint lead agencies for grizzly bear restoration in the United States portion of the NCE.

What is the Purpose and Need?

The purpose of the process is to determine how best to restore grizzly bears to the NCE, a portion of its historic range. Since the NCE grizzly bears are essentially gone from the ecosystem, action is needed at this time to:

- Avoid the permanent loss of grizzly bears in the NCE
- Contribute to the restoration of biodiversity of the ecosystem for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations
- Enhance the probability of long-term survival and conservation of grizzly bears within the NCE and thereby contribute to overall grizzly bear recovery
- Support the recovery of the grizzly bear to the point where it can be removed from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife Species

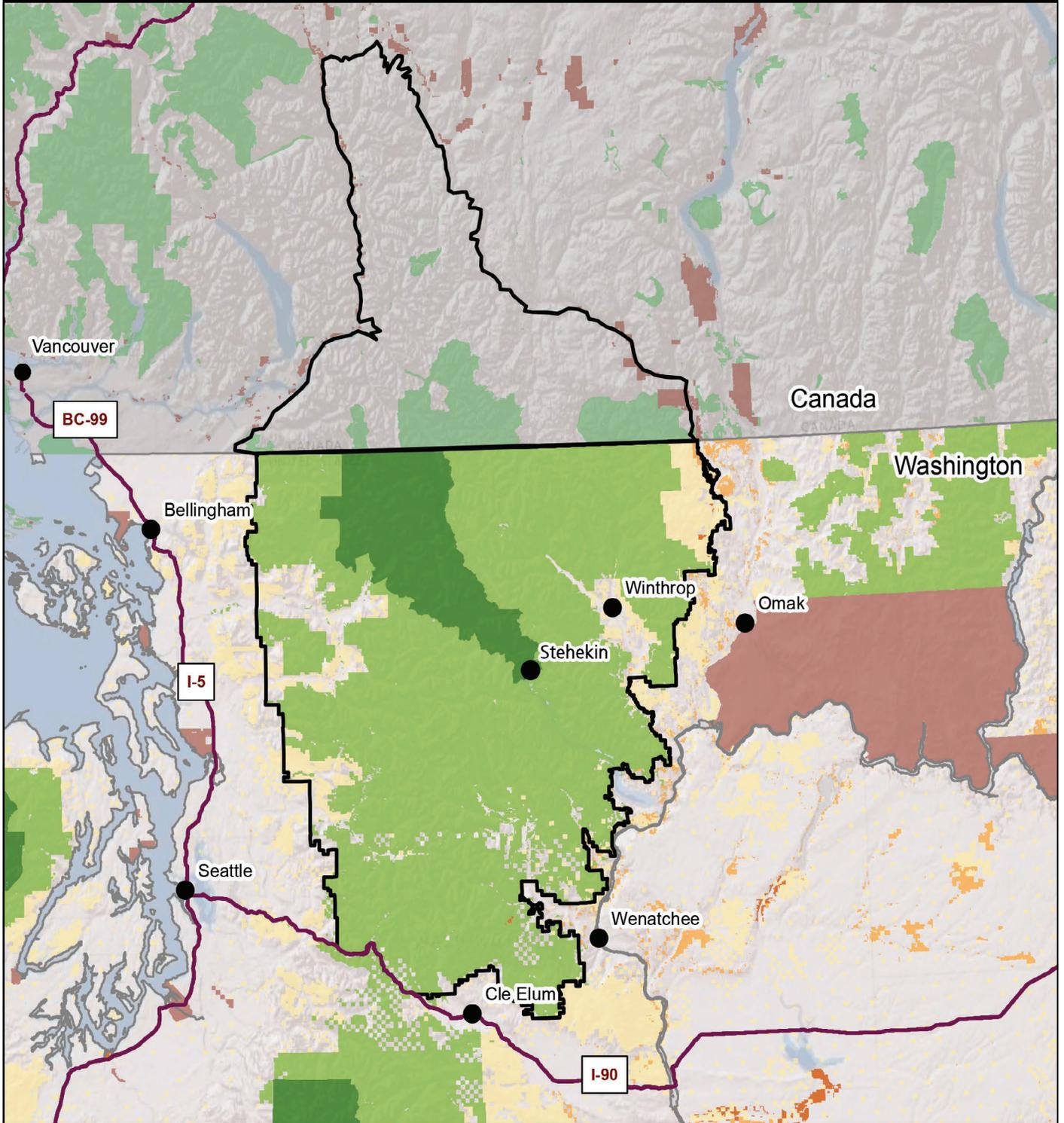
Objectives

The objectives of the proposed action are to:

- Restore a grizzly bear population as part of the natural and cultural heritage of the North Cascades
- Provide Pacific Northwest residents and visitors with the opportunity to again experience grizzly bears in their native habitat
- Support Tribal cultural and spiritual values, as well as environmental and natural resource objectives related to the grizzly bear

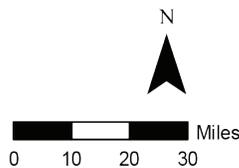


North Cascades Ecosystem



Legend

- Cities
 - Major Interstates and Highways
 - ▭ North Cascades Ecosystem
 - Water
 - Protected Areas (British Columbia)
 - Canada
- Land Ownership**
- Tribal
 - US Bureau of Land Management
 - US Fish and Wildlife Service
 - US Forest Service
 - US National Park Service
 - State Lands



The Planning Process

As part of the planning process, various approaches for the restoration of grizzly bear populations to the NCE will be evaluated. Preliminary alternatives to be considered in the Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) include the no action alternative (continue existing management), as well as active restoration alternatives including moving grizzly bears from other United States and/or Canadian populations into the NCE as an experimental population under section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

A 10(j) experimental population is a special designation for a group of plants or animals that will be reintroduced in an area that is geographically isolated from other populations of the species. The 10(j) experimental population designation would provide land managers with greater management flexibility in the event of human-grizzly bear conflict situations. Management actions anticipated under an experimental population designation would focus on supporting grizzly bear restoration in the NCE while reducing or avoiding potential land use and other conflicts in areas both inside and outside the NCE

Issues

In the context of NEPA reviews, “issues” or “environmental issues” can be problems, concerns, conflicts, obstacles, or benefits that would result if the proposed action or alternatives, including the no-action alternative, are implemented. With respect to grizzly bear restoration in the NCE, the NPS and FWS have identified the following issues:

- Rare or unusual vegetation
- Wildlife and wildlife habitat
- Soundscapes
- Wilderness
- Visitor use and experience
- Socioeconomics
- Human safety
- Experimental population designation

Range of Preliminary Alternative Concepts

As part of the planning process, various alternatives will be evaluated. Preliminary draft alternative concepts being considered include the no-action alternative (no change from current management) and one action alternative.

Alternative A (No Action)

Under the no action alternative existing management practices would be followed, and no new management actions would be implemented beyond those available at the outset of the grizzly bear restoration planning process. Management actions would be focused on improved sanitation, poaching control, motorized access management, outreach, and educational programs to provide information about grizzly bears and grizzly bear recovery to the public, and research and monitoring to determine grizzly bear presence, distribution, habitat, and home ranges.

Alternative B (Proposed Action)

Under the proposed action, the NPS and FWS would capture bears from source populations in interior British Columbia or the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. Captured grizzly bears would be released into the NCE with a goal of establishing a population of grizzly bears. Grizzly bears could be removed or relocated based on conflicts with humans. The proposed action would designate grizzly bears in the U.S. portion of the NCE and surrounding areas as an experimental population under section 10(j) of the ESA.

Other Potential Alternatives

Options for restoring the NCE grizzly population without a 10(j) designation as well as variations in the number and frequency of grizzly bear releases into the NCE to achieve the restoration goal in a shorter or longer time period as compared to the proposed action.

Timeline

1975	Grizzly bear listed as threatened species, lower 48 States under Endangered Species Act.
1980	Grizzly bear listed as an endangered species by State of Washington.
1982	National Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan approved by FWS; revised in 1993.
1983	Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee established.
1991	9,800 square miles of North Cascades ecosystem in Washington State identified as adequate habitat for grizzly bears. Grizzly bears are confirmed in locations from just north of Interstate 90 to the international border.
1991	The decision was made by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee during their winter 1991 meeting to recover grizzly bears in the North Cascades.
1993	Detailed habitat evaluation of the North Cascades ecosystem published.
1997	North Cascades chapter added to National Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.
2004	A grizzly bear recovery plan was completed for the British Columbia portion of North Cascades ecosystem.
2014	NPS/FWS began drafting Environmental Impact Statement on grizzly bear restoration in the North Cascades ecosystem. The effort was discontinued in 2020.
2022	The NPS/FWS has reinitiated the process for developing and implementing a Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan for the North Cascades Ecosystem.

How to Comment

Comments may be submitted in the following ways:

1. Electronically at: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCEGrizzly> during the dates noted
2. Mail or hand deliver to:

Superintendent

North Cascades National Park Service Complex

810 State Route 20

Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

Comments will not be accepted by fax, e-mail, or in any other form than those specified above. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted.

When making public comments, please consider the following questions:

1. What other alternatives, alternative elements, or management tools should be considered?
2. What issues should be considered when evaluating the restoration of grizzly bears in the NCE?
3. What do you like and dislike about the preliminary alternative concepts, and why?

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

For additional information on the project as it progresses, continue to visit <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCEGrizzly>.

Project Schedule	
Fall 2022	Public Scoping (We are here)
Spring 2023	Draft Plan/EIS Release and Public Comment
Summer 2023	Final Plan/EIS Release
Winter 2023	NPS/FWS Record of Decision

Public Scoping Virtual Meetings

The NPS/FWS will host two virtual public scoping meetings. Meeting dates and times are available at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCEGrizzly>. During the virtual public scoping meetings, the NPS/FWS will present information pertinent to the EIS and allow the public to ask questions regarding the scope of issues and alternatives that should be considered when preparing the EIS. While the NPS/FWS will not solicit oral comments at these virtual public meetings, written comments may be submitted at any time during the scoping period.