

# Grizzly bear reintroduction to the cascades



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

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Before the mid nineteen hundreds grizzly bears could be found in abundance along the northern cascades of Washington State. However, Grizzly bears were seen as a potential harm to the expanding human population and the increased value for their fur lead to their downfall. Grizzly bears are a rare occurrence in the Northern Cascades after hunting and urbanization wiped out the population and many politicians do not think that is a bad thing <sup>3</sup>. An estimated 5-20 bears may reside in the Northern Cascades today, however sightings of residing bears are recorded years apart <sup>4</sup>. As the Fish and Wildlife Department discuss reintroduction efforts of the grizzly bear population in the Northern Cascades with encouragement, local politicians and citizens alike have a very mixed interpretation of what this would entail.

Given the grizzly bear's scientific name *Ursus arctos horribilis* meaning "horrible bear" one could possibly understand why people may be afraid of them <sup>1</sup>. A lot of people are not entirely educated on the grizzly bear and its behavior and eating habits and so fear drives the imagination of what a grizzly bear would do. In the media, the focus on bears is typically negative and this perception is what is maintained throughout the public. However, those who live in bear country have had different experiences. When sustainable practices like disposing of trash properly and feeding the bears is restrained, the bears lose their dependence on humans and contact with them is extremely rare <sup>1</sup>. People are already living peacefully with wild grizzly bears and incidents are rare and more likely if a person is being irresponsible in the habitat. People really do not need to be afraid of these

bears and if sustainable practices continue throughout their habitat, risk of an attack would be slim to none.

Grizzly bears are listed as threatened in the lower 48 states and are even protected by the Endangered Species act in these areas. Because of their status and well-studied background, these bears are also known as umbrella species in the wildlife conservation effort <sup>2</sup>. This means the efforts made to protect the grizzly bear habitat also protects all other threatened species and their survival <sup>8</sup>. Not only would habitat conservation and reintroduction be beneficial for the grizzly population, but other species in the northern cascades living in the same habitat would benefit from the protection as well.

One last reason grizzly bear reintroduction would be beneficial is that these bears can be used as a keystone species in their environments <sup>8</sup>. Grizzly bears are omnivores and therefore eat plants and other animals. Since their food range is so large the presence of the bears impacts the entire trophic cascade. Grizzly bears eat berries and aid in the dispersal of their seeds through its waste, increasing the amount of seedlings that grow. Plant species in their habitat also thrive off of dead salmon carcasses for the large amounts of nitrogen they contain. Grizzly bears are the sole reason why plants within the forests further away from the rivers gain access to this valuable resource because the bears bring the carcasses into the forest to eat <sup>5</sup>. Therefore, bringing in grizzly bears not only impacts their own population and survival but that of other species as well.

Although grizzly bears would be beneficial for the ecosystem in the Northern Cascades, consideration into negative effects of their presence must be taken into account. Urbanization and farming are always increasing as the human population grows and with that we encroach on habitats of many species. Grizzly bears in Alaska live side by side with humans residing there and are no stranger to being sighted in public areas <sup>7</sup>. In a state where grizzly bears are in abundance many headlines of bear attacks have occurred. Unregulated garbage disposal and habitat protection are the main causes of bear interactions with humans, however it would be hard for the state or any enforcement to control every individual's garbage <sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the chance bears become dependent on trash is most likely present whether we try and control it or not. So, reintroducing grizzly bears to the Northern Cascades does pose a risk this same situation in Alaska will occur in Washington. And, because there's a risk that a human life would be put in danger due to the bear's presence a lot of people would agree it is not worth the effort to bring them back.

A second argument against reintroducing bears is the dangers it will cause on livestock and farm animals. Bears are a top predator and can easily kill other animals as large as cows. Some fears are that when grizzly bears are brought in, farmers will lose livestock and this also increases the chances of human interaction as farmers try to fend for their animals. A good example of this already occurring is in Anchorage, Alaska where a lot of residents in the city keep chickens and smaller animals such as goats. Over the years grizzly bears present in the area have attracted to where these small animals are and easily have a small snack <sup>7</sup>. Because this is already a

problem in another area with grizzlies many farmers do not want the same situation to occur on their farms in Washington and so are against bringing back the grizzly bear.

One last argument against grizzly reintroduction is that there are less harmful species that could be used as umbrella species and keystone species that live in the same habitats. Bison for example do not normally attack humans unless provoked and would not harm livestock like bears potentially could. Bison are also protected under federal law and they provide the same umbrella effect as bears would <sup>8</sup>. Bringing in the Bison to Washington would provide most of the same benefits as bears would without the dangers. Grey wolves are already making an appearance in Washington as well. Although many consider them dangerous, wolves are a very effective keystone species in the fact they control deer and coyote populations and indirectly overgrazing and small mammal survival <sup>8</sup>. Since wolves are moving into Washington on their own it could be argued bears should not be reintroduced because there is already one dangerous animal in the ecosystem serving the same role as the grizzly would have.

In my opinion I believe that the grizzly bear should be reintroduced to the Northern Cascades of Washington. Although they do pose a danger to humans, we have shown the ability to live side by side with them given the circumstances there is no dependence on humans for food. If we were able to effectively enforce this, there would not be much of a risk to people <sup>7</sup>. The benefits grizzly bears would bring to the ecosystem as an umbrella and keystone species I believe also outweigh the risk they would pose to humans

as long as we control dependency for food. Also, the habitat the government plans to use to reintroduce grizzly bears is largely without any roads and therefore in areas where human contact would be extremely rare in the first place <sup>6</sup>. All in all, grizzly bears have a greater purpose than most citizens give credit and I truly believe our state would benefit from their presence.

## Works Cited

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