

Grizzly West: A Failed Attempt to Reintroduce Grizzly Bears in the Mountain West

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Grizzly West: A Failed Attempt to Reintroduce Grizzly Bears in the Mountain West

By Michael M. Dax. Lincoln, NE:
University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
x + 289 pp. US\$ 37.50. ISBN 978-0-8032-6673-5.

No one who is watching the current US presidential campaign, or who has observed the increasing political divisions within America, will be surprised by the causal events described in Michael Dax's book, *Grizzly West*. The book's subtitle, *A Failed Attempt to Reintroduce Grizzly Bears in the Mountain West*, succinctly outlines the story and the outcome.

Dax starts by putting the history of the grizzly bear within the contiguous United States into a historical context, detailing a classic scenario of an increase in human settlement with a decrease in the apex predator. The story of the bitter cultural differences over the wolf recovery program, which resulted in gray wolves being re-established within the western states, laid the battle lines that divided opinion for a similar exercise for grizzly bears. The proposed reintroduction site was a large swathe of undeveloped north to central Idaho and a small neighboring portion of Montana called the Selway-Bitterroot ecosystem. Research had indicated that the region had been devoid of grizzly bears since around 1946, which was the year of the last confirmed sign of the species, and the distances from other extant populations, like in Yellowstone, were too great to expect the area to be repopulated via natural migration.

The factions on either side of the argument could be reasonably and neatly classed as conservative, Republican voting, antibear types who had a long history in the western states and relatively newer arrivals who were generally liberal, Democratic voting,

probear supporters. The antibear people had a long history in the area and were usually connected with extractive industries such as ranching, logging, and mining. They saw the bear reintroduction project as a way of limiting their activities and affecting their livelihoods. Bizarrely, Dax refers to their approach as "wise use" conservation, conserving land and resources to benefit humankind, and to those who wanted to protect nature and wild places as preservationists. Although that definition of conservation may have been accurate for the late 19th and early 20th century, it caused me to reread the relevant section, because my definition of conservation in a 21st-century context is rather different.

The most vocal elements of the two sides of the argument probably deserve equal blame for the project resulting in not even one bear being reintroduced. Those against bear reintroduction resorted to all the exaggerated stereotyped lines about the hazards that grizzlies represent to people and the restrictions that would be placed on development and use of the region through the application of the Endangered Species Act; the specter of Big Government taking control. Those in favor of the grizzly reintroduction did everything in their power to ensure that the proposals presented by the Roots Coalition, a compromise group that composed of bear researchers, conservationists, and important elements of the logging industry, were seen as sellouts, because their proposal was not a purist, 100% conservation biology-based plan.

The politicians, of both party persuasions, swayed back and forth on the issue but ultimately supported the antibear camp. Possibly the most bizarre political activity was at a meeting held in the town of Salmon, Idaho, where a resolution was passed stating that grizzly bears never resided in the Bitterroot Mountains; there is a staggering body

of data to the contrary, but denial of facts seems to be a trait of much of right-wing America.

Grizzly bears are physically formidable carnivores, but the number of serious interactions with humans and their livestock, even in heavily visited areas in and around Yellowstone National Park, are statistically inconsequential. However, those living in regions with significant populations of large predators, such as tigers or lions, are expected to take suitable precautions to protect themselves and their domestic animals and thus assist in protecting these internationally identifiable conservation icons. It strikes me as rather hypocritical that, with all the physical and financial resources that the United States and its people possess, a simple and logical project to reestablish a species within part of its historical range should be viewed as a sellout by one side and a threat by the other.

Closer to my home in Scotland, the repetitive raising of the idea of wolf reintroduction into the Scottish Highlands has been superseded by somewhat more realistic talk of reintroducing lynx. The lynx, like the wolf, occurred in Scotland until a few hundred years ago, but unlike the wolf, it does not carry the baggage of the Little Red Riding Hood mythology of bloodthirsty packs killing children and entire flocks of sheep. If one was to hold a referendum on the subject, as with the idea of returning grizzlies to central Idaho, a majority of the Scottish population would vote in favor of the idea of lynx. But as with the grizzly scenario, most supporters of such a plan live nowhere near the proposed release sites.

Dax's book presents a detailed account of the concerns of the different stakeholder groups, the historical background of the subject, and related meetings and discussions. It is not a particularly easy read, but it is incredibly informative. Anyone

with an interest in the subject of large-predator reintroduction, from either side of the argument, would do well to carefully read this book. I would like to think that some protagonists in the Bitterroot grizzly debacle, which concluded around 2001, would choose to read Dax's book and revisit the idea.

Ironically, in 2007, a single grizzly bear migrated the 140 miles, as the

crow flies, from the Selkirk ecosystem near the Canadian border to the northern edge of the Bitterroots. It was shot by a hunter from Tennessee who had mistaken it for his intended quarry, a more common American black bear. This grizzly was unaware of resolution passed in the town of Salmon, and there have been no further sightings since then.

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