

By Matt Holloway

In the rainy, quiet, northwest corner of Montana's Yaak Valley, there is an isolated population of grizzly bears that holds on by a thread. Twenty, maybe twenty-five bears call the Yaak home, with perhaps only three to five breeding females—certainly not the numbers one expects to find elsewhere in Montana. In fact, there are no more grizzlies in the Yaak now than in 1976, when they were added to the Endangered Species List. Poaching, clearcutting, and a never-ending web of U.S. Forest Service roads keep this subpopulation tipping toward extinction. In November 2020, as evidence of abject human-caused mortalities, a female grizzly was shot, mutilated, and dumped in a driveway. The Yaak grizzlies' situation is so dire that longtime grizzly bear activist Doug Peacock, and others, call them the "walking dead."

But there is more.

Bisecting "core" grizzly bear recovery zones as established by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFW) is the federally designated Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail (PNT). What might seem benign at face value is in fact a ticking time bomb. The PNT cuts through the heart of the Yaak grizzlies' critical summer alpine habitat, and unlike in neighboring Glacier National Park where there are myriad and expansive alpine meadows, in the Yaak these zones number fewer than a dozen. Many are smaller than a suburban lawn. Science has proven that hikers stress and displace bears, so even though thru-hikers don't see a grizzly does not mean that they haven't bumped one from critical habitat at a critical time. For many bears, this could mean life or death—especially for a female and cubs. Some models project that losing an adult female even only every other year dooms this unique subpopulation to extinction in twenty short years.

But there is hope.

First, a bit of background. The PNT is a thru-hiker trail that begins on the Continental Divide in Glacier National Park and travels to the Pacific Coast. It was proposed in the 1970s. The U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service rejected it for reasons of cost and negative impacts on northwest Montana's grizzly population. Nonetheless, in 2009, Congress authorized the trail by attaching a single paragraph to a must-pass Omnibus Bill.

Congress had requested a feasibility study in 1978, which was completed in 1980. Montana voices were not adequately consulted in the many years prior to the authorization and placement of the trail, which currently wanders a cobbled-together existing grid of paved highways, active logging roads, and already-existing foot-trails.

Congress also mandated the USFS complete a Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) by 2011. The USFS never instituted such a plan; as a result, the USFS is twelve years out of compliance.

In 2019, a local grassroots organization—the Yaak Valley Forest Council—stepped in with their first-ever lawsuit, filed against USFS because of a lack of a plan. In late July 2020, a federal judge ruled that USFS' failure to complete a route plan for the PNT, and their promotion of that trail, creates a reasonable probability that the lack of a plan threatens Yaak grizzlies.

Back to the hope.

The Yaak Valley Forest Council has created an alternative route that sends PNT thru-hikers south of the Yaak Valley, away from grizzly core recovery zones, and along a similar route to the one proposed in 1980. The goal is for Congress or the USFS to move the trail to this route, but in the meantime USFS is encouraging thru-hikers to go ahead and use the current and disruptive route.

In the summer of 2020, my ten-year-old daughter and I hiked the proposed southern re-route. I can attest to its beauty, wildness, and remote character. The trail goes over summits with sweeping views and lookout towers, through drooping cedar and hemlock forests, and even through the trail towns of Libby and Troy in case one desires a shower, hotel, restaurant, or resupply. What started near Eureka, Montana and ended at the Idaho Panhandle border was a nineteen-day, 160-mile adventure.

My sincere hope is that any future PNT hikers will *choose* to hike this southern route. Our choices matter. We can decide how to ethically and respectfully interact with a landscape. We can choose when and where to recreate, regardless of the activity. We have a chance to extend humility and compassion toward another species and to kindle some degree of understanding of our own limitations. It seems that in our present-day culture, it's nearly impossible to admit that we might have missed something, that we might have been—heaven forbid—wrong. But the PNT is wrong for Yaak grizzlies.

By rerouting the trail or choosing to hike the proposed southern route, we are decreasing the stress to these grizzlies by minimizing human-bear interaction during hiking season when they are breeding, rearing their young, and putting on weight for the next long winter.

As more people move to rural areas and as outdoor recreation continues to boom, we must continue to evaluate how to support the recovery of the grizzly bear. If one looks from a common-sense standpoint, or through the scientific lens of the bear experts, or both, rerouting the trail would unequivocally be best for the bears. If one stretches his or her mind and heart and sees the situation from the bear's perspective, there is no option but to reroute the trail.

But again, the real point is simple—any decision to keep the trail in core grizzly habitat in the Yaak would be a decision in favor of human recreation and against grizzly bear recovery. A decision to reroute the trail will help the bears continue to call the Yaak home.

Will we continue to put our fun first?
Or will we act humbly and respectfully and reroute the PNT?

The choice is ours.
The bears are waiting.

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