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SUBJ: HABITAT FOR GRIZZLY BEARS OF THE YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM

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Please accept the following comments as input into the hearings on habitat issues related to recovery of grizzly bears in the Yellowstone Ecosystem held in Bozeman MT on 17 June, 1997.

For the grizzly bears of the Yellowstone Ecosystem, at least one message of modern Conservation Biology is clear: The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem can never, by itself, support a self-sustaining population of grizzlies.

The first requirements of any adequate Yellowstone Ecosystem habitat plan for these and other wide-ranging, low-density animals must include:

1. A block of secure habitat that is large enough to support a Yellowstone subpopulation of grizzlies through long-term variations in their food, security and other requirements.
2. Strips of protected habitat that link the Yellowstone Ecosystem with other blocks of secure habitat and that allow grizzlies to survive and move at rates sufficient for genetic exchange between subpopulations.

An isolated Yellowstone Ecosystem could, at best, support only several hundred grizzlies. It is now clear that long-term survival of grizzlies within such an island would depend on augmentation and/or other expensive, intrusive, and unproven technologies.

Any grizzly bear population that depends on continued augmentation is not self-sustaining and must be considered threatened or endangered. Accordingly, any habitat plan for the Yellowstone grizzlies that accepts the notion of an isolated block of occupied habitat cannot rationally lead to their "delisting." A plan that requires actions like augmentation may be a prescription for tenuous persistence; it cannot be a plan for "recovery" in any non-trivial sense of that word.

To eventually "delist" the grizzly bear anywhere within the Northern Rockies Ecosystem, managers must create a landscape that supports a self-perpetuating population of the great bears. This landscape must include a coherent system of large blocks of land, each with a subpopulation of bears, and all connected by lands with sufficient security and resources for genetic exchange between subpopulations.

Fortunately, a Northern Rockies Ecosystem that can support self-sustaining populations of our great carnivores still lies within our grasp. For the Yellowstone ecosystem, the first two priorities must be: 1. Protection of a sufficiently large block to insure survival of a Yellowstone subpopulation of grizzlies on the time scale of at least centuries. 2. Development of habitat management plans for landscapes that will allow genetic linkage between the Yellowstone Ecosystem and other grizzly bear subpopulations.