

Grizzly Bears in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Grizzly bears on the North Slope of Alaska, from the Beaufort Sea coast to the Brooks Range, are at their northernmost limit of their range.¹ The grizzly bear densities are relatively low and the bears feed on a variety of foods including roots and berries in the appropriate seasons, scavenged carcasses, caribou calves, Arctic ground squirrels, and human foods and waste.^{1,2}

Studies of the grizzly bear populations using Prudhoe oil fields showed a greater than average mortality among young bears because their dependence upon human foods made them more vulnerable to hunters along the Dalton highway and to Defense of Life and Property (DLP) killings.¹

During the summer of 2001, five grizzly bears accustomed to human food sources were killed in the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. Two yearlings were killed in a management action. Later their mother was killed. A bear was killed at the Cape Smythe Hangar, and in September a two-year old male grizzly was killed eating garbage after it had actually entered the Prudhoe Bay Hotel. These DLP kills are an example of what ultimately happens to bears when development takes place in their wilderness habitat. Bears are often drawn to human camps by dumpsters and handouts, both of which lead to additional fatal interactions.

During the early days of oil field development, a study was conducted to propose mechanisms and techniques to limit human and grizzly bear encounters.³ The recommendations failed to achieve results, and bears declined because of more accessible hunting, and increased "defensive" shooting during interactions with humans. Early studies of grizzly bears in the oil field also showed that 100% used human sources for food. While the later studies demonstrate that many of the early problems with intentional feeding and sloppy disposal have been improved, 22% of the estimated 60-70 oil-field grizzly bears still rely upon human food sources.⁴ These same trends are very likely to repeat themselves should the Arctic Refuge also be developed.

The annual mortality rate of adults and independent young grizzlies in the oil field study area was 7.0%. For independent young bears using human food sources, the mortality rate of 15.8% was well in excess of sustainable levels.

Another concern with the Arctic Refuge is changing the pattern of grizzly bears that travel from their mountain home ranges down to the coastal plain, especially the 1002 area proposed for development) to prey on newborn caribou calves. None of the other North Slope grizzly bears have this same movement pattern, including those found using the Prudhoe Bay area.⁵ A disruption of the traditional caribou migration to these calving areas would likely have serious repercussions on the grizzly bear population as well.

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4. Reynolds, H. V. and G. W. Garner. 1987. Patterns of grizzly bear predation on caribou in northern Alaska. Int. Conf. Bear Res. And Manage. 7:59-67.

5. USFWS. 2001. Arctic Refuge web site. <http://www.r7.fws.gov/nwr/arctic/arctic.html>

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