



October 20, 1998

Dear Everybody:

Earlier this summer, in "Cow Creek", an alpine meadow surrounded by the granite peaks of the Selkirk Mountains, I sat with a grizzly bear's head in my lap. The head seemed as large as a wheel barrow. It was so massive that both Greg Johnson and Wayne Wakkinen, grizzly bear biologists with the Idaho Fish and Game Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Project, struggled to lift it. The fur -- thick, rich brown, with flecks of autumn gold - was like a deep pile carpet under my hands as we fastened a radio transmitter around the bear's neck. It had taken nearly four weeks to catch Trapper and Kootenai, his mate, and six more weeks to catch another two bears. But, by summer's end, five grizzlies were toting collars, each providing information on the habitat they need. The U. S. Forest Service is using this information to design an "access management program" that will minimize stress and mortality in grizzlies by minimizing human intrusion in areas that are critical for the bears.

Long before Autumn began frosting the larches, aspens and birches to gold on the shoulders of the Selkirks, and the first snows dusted the peaks, Hope, the mother grizzly and her two yearling cubs sensed the turning season. Their feeding became increasingly urgent as they tried to lay on enough fat to carry them through the long winter months to come. But this summer's harsh El Ninjo, lengthened and exacerbated by global warming, burned the huckleberries and other forage to blackened crisps on their stems. Three weeks ago, I rode Summit, my horse, into the mountains, and with Greg Johnson sat on Trapper's Peak, in the heart of grizzly bear central, amid the burned and wizened huckleberries. For an hour we glassed the basins all around us, and in an area that normally would support herds of elk, mule deer, and lots of bears, a solitary black bear and a few grouse were our only companions. This will be a hard winter for Hope and her cubs, and for all those who would have gained sustenance from those high meadows.

Before then, and much earlier than usual, Hope, Trapper, Kootenai, and the other bears headed down Cow Creek, Smith Creek, and other drainages toward the vast Kootenai River valley below. Historically, the Kootenai was the winter range for bears, and other flagship North American species, as well as one of the largest continuous wetlands for ducks, geese and other waterfowl in the West. But years ago, the Kootenai, and virtually all other bottom lands, have been ditched, diked and drained for farmland. There is danger for bears in the wheat fields and among the human settlements. And so, Hope, and the others have silently stalked through a single narrow undeveloped corridor to plunder apples from old orchards perched on the foot hills above the valley floor. And this is where we stand with them to fight for what little is left; for unless we can hold open this corridor, and unless we can secure some of the bottom land that was once available to them, their population may be doomed by development and the coming climate.

This need to recover some of our Northwest's river valleys, and the temperate interior rain forests above them, for waterfowl, deer, elk and bears, is what drives our conservation efforts now. With Federal agricultural subsidies at an all time low, and timber and crop prices even lower, we conservationists have a window of opportunity to help acquire failing farm and timber lands to reinstate the wetlands and adjacent uplands so critical to the survival of our threatened North American wildlife. We must act now to buy up and manage for wildlife as many of these critical pieces of habitat as we can before they are developed for commercial real estate. Also, we must map the unique temperate interior rain forest ecosystem, so that the impact of logging, mining and agriculture on threatened species, forests and water quality can be minimized through planning.

To this end, the Owens Foundation is partnering, coordinating, and collaborating with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy and other agencies and organizations. But, we urgently need your help as many of these critical properties are coming up for sale. I hate solicitations – always have, and so I'm not very good at asking. But, this is one of the most important conservation initiatives we have ever adopted. It's not just about conserving bears, but an entire ecosystem, one that is unique in North America. So if you can help, or take this plea to someone who can, please do it now.

Before I leave you to think about this, I must tell you that through the Owens Foundation you have already provided more than two-thirds of all the money the State of Idaho has allocated to its Department of Fish and Game to conserve all the threatened and endangered species in this state. Be proud of that. Together we can move mountains. We have before, and we will again.

Thank you from the mountains, and for all who live there.

Cheers,



Mark and Delia

PS: What you can do:

Contact people with affluence and influence and ask them to contribute to the Owens Foundation effort to acquire and restore critical bottomlands/wetlands for bears and other wildlife. Contact Mary Dykes at our office in Atlanta (770) 270-0729/ e-mail <73130.3137.compuserve.com> for information on tax breaks for donors and/or conservation-minded purchasers of land in and around the Kootenai Valley.

Please call or write Iowa Senator Harkin's office in Washington (202) 224-3254 to ask him to clear "The Bear Protection Act" so that the Senate may vote on the bill. Mailing address: 731 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Email <tom_harkin@harkin.senate.gov>

Contact the government of British Columbia in Vancouver and demand an end to the hunting of grizzly bears and to the clear cutting of timber in the temperate interior rain forests of B.C.: Glen Clark, MLA Premier of British Columbia Parliament Building, Room 156 Victoria, BC V8V 1X4 CANADA. Telephone (250) 356-6342, FAX: (250) 387-0087, Email <glen_clark@bc.sympatico.ca>

We need to raise funds to map the temperate interior rain forest. Please help if you can.

Have faith that your phone calls and letters do make a difference. US Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck took your letters, boxes of them, to Congress and used them to suspend the construction of more logging roads in wilderness areas. Well done!