Bring the grizzly back to California? Critics say no way

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WALNUT CREEK, Calif. — The fierce grizzly bear ruled California’s valleys, forests and coasts until people shot the last ones nearly a century ago. Now an environmental group is asking the state to consider bringing it back.

The Center for Biological Diversity is trying to drum up support for the state to study reintroducing grizzly bears to remote areas such as the Sierra. The proposal is fanning strong emotions about humans’ uneasy relationship with the big predators they are trying to save.

Not surprisingly, some critics suggest it would be impractical and unsafe to reintroduce the 800-pound grizzly, also known as the brown bear, to the most populated state in the nation. The state’s wildlife agency is among the critics.

“Reintroducing grizzly bears to California would be idiotic,” said Pete Margiotta, a San Francisco Bay Area resident and longtime hunter. “Somebody is going to get killed.”
Organization Says There's Plenty Of Room For Grizzlies In California

The center is a frequent plaintiff in legal disputes over endangered species. It says the grizzly bear's recovery from near extinction in the lower 48 states would be more secure if the species expanded its range beyond select areas in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Washington.

California has many remote and sparsely populated areas that might be suitable for grizzlies, the center says.

“The grizzly bear is an icon in California history. It's on our state flag, but where is the grizzly bear?” said Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate for the national group with an office in Oakland. “There are serious issues to be addressed with reintroduction, but this idea should not be dismissed out of hand because of emotion.”

Grizzlies Nearly Went Extinct, But They're Rebounding

While the last grizzly in the California wild was shot in the early 1920s, there are some 1,400 to 1,700 of them in the United States, excluding Alaska, where there are more of them. The number is a small fraction of the 50,000 believed to have once roamed between the Pacific Ocean and Great Plains in the early 1800s.

The Center for Biological Diversity has collected some 20,000 signatures on an online petition urging the state Fish and Game Commission to consider studying the possibility of reintroducing the grizzly. The bear is listed as a federal threatened species.

The group also is doing social media ads for its campaign. It is preparing to present a formal petition to the commission in a few months.

Group Is Calling For "Rewilding" For Grizzlies, Other Carnivores

Environmentalists call the messages part of a broader national campaign of “rewilding” areas to restore large carnivores such as bears, wolves, badgers and otters. They also want to protect large connected living spaces for them.

Large predators and large home areas, rewilding advocates say, are essential to keeping ecosystems healthy.

However, skeptics of reintroducing grizzlies into California say there are a lot of practical problems with bringing back a bear that weighs up to 800 pounds. The grizzly is roughly double the size of existing black bears in California.

While grizzly attacks on people are rare in North America, the bear's size and strength can make for fatal results when people get in the way. In Yellowstone National Park, grizzly bears have killed eight people over 145 years. That compares to six deaths from fallen trees, five deaths due to lightning and six deaths from avalanches. Also, their big appetites spur grizzlies to travel long distances in search of food, biologists say.
Grizzlies Could End Up Near People, Livestock

Jordan Traverso, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said her agency is concerned that grizzlies would wander out of remote areas. They could end up in less remote places near people and livestock.

The Center for Biological Diversity has suggested remote Sierra areas as grizzly territory. Traverso said the Sierra has more limited food sources and a shorter growing season than coastal, marsh or valley areas where grizzly bears used to roam. Salmon and other wildlife the bears feasted on 150 to 200 years ago are not as abundant as they used to be, she said.

“We already have many problems with conflicts with wildlife,” she said. “I cannot foresee us taking on the burden and extra cost of something like this.”

Wildlife managers worry whether people could adapt to living or traveling near grizzlies. They would need to learn to carry bear repellent, not make noise to surprise bears, not leave out food, and generally stay clear of bears, especially protective mother bears with cubs.

“One important issue is whether people who live in their area would value bears enough to tolerate them,” said Peter Alagona, a University of California, Santa Barbara associate professor. “Tolerating them could mean changing how you live,” he said.

Last Study On California Grizzlies Was In 1955

Alagona is communicating with other wildlife and environmental experts about grizzly bears. He said he has formed no opinion on reintroducing grizzlies, but he favors a study on the idea.

“We don’t have enough information,” Alagona said, noting that the last study on grizzly bears in California was done in 1955.

Alagona said Europe has far more brown bears in less territory than the lower 48 states in the United States.

Critics Say Grizzlies Would Be Bad For Ranchers, Rural Residents

The California Cattlemen’s Association says it doesn’t need a study to conclude that bringing back grizzlies would be bad for ranchers and rural residents.

“The call for this study is a publicity stunt,” said Kirk Wilbur, manager of government affairs for the association.

Merle McIntosh, a San Francisco resident who enjoys visiting the two grizzlies at the San Francisco Zoo, said he sees no problem with a study on grizzly reintroduction.

“Don’t you do studies so you can make informed decisions?” McIntosh said. “If we’re trying to save the grizzlies, then why don’t you study it?”
The grizzlies at the San Francisco Zoo were orphaned as cubs in Montana and brought to the zoo, which was created in the memory of a grizzly bear.