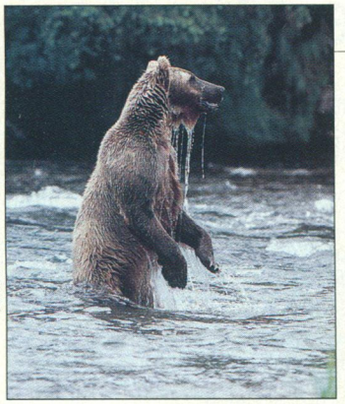
edited by RICHARD STONE



JOHNNY JOHNSON / ANIMALS ANIMALS

Threatened or just wet? Scientists oppose plan to save the grizzly.

Grizzly Plan Has Scientists Growling

A federal proposal to save the grizzly bear from extinction is coming under heavy fire from scientists who view it as a measure to preserve the status quo rather than restore the bear to viable population levels.

Grizzly bears once roamed North America, but their numbers and range have declined steadily in the past few hundred years. In 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) added the grizzly to the threatened species list and set to work on a recovery plan to increase the grizzly population and restore its habitat, which includes part of Yellowstone National Park. FWS drafted a plan in 1982 and has been revising it recently to reflect new FWS research.

However, a group of conservation scientists mauled the revision when it was released last December. Their dismay centers on statistical models FWS used to count grizzlies as well as the number of bears deemed sufficient for species survival. In a 6 January letter to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt—who has authority over FWS—the group questioned assumptions in the report, such as that grizzlies are being born faster than they're dying. "The population in Yellowstone is declining, not increasing as [FWS] would have you believe," asserts Interior biologist David Mattson.

Mattson concedes he's not an impartial observer: He left the recovery team because of a dispute over FWS's data analysis. And some of the others, whose work was cited in the plan, disagree with its conclusions. The scientists have asked Babbitt to scrap the plan and consider an alternative they authored under the aegis of The Wilderness Society, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental group.

FWS officials insist their proposal relies on the best available science. "No one has a better way of estimating the grizzly population without capturing the bears," says FWS biologist Chris Servheen, the plan's lead author. He denies FWS is attempting to delist the grizzly prematurely.

A Babbitt spokesperson says the secretary is reviewing the concerns and the alternate plan.

New NSF Deputy

The National Science Foundation has tapped a new deputy director: Anne Petersen, vice president for research and dean of the University of Minnesota graduate school. A developmental psychologist, Petersen chairs a National Research Council panel on child-abuse research. She would succeed Fred Bernthal as deputy to NSF Director Neal Lane. A White House announcement is expected shortly.

Academia Faces Curbs On Indirect Costs

The White House effort to "reinvent government" now includes a new, restrictive formula limiting indirect cost payments to universities. *Science* has learned that the 1995 budget that President Clinton is expected to submit to Congress on 7 February contains a last-minute provision that freezes, for 1 year, the amount of indirect costs that institutions can recoup from the government.

Indirect costs are expenses associated with federal research grants for which universities may seek reimbursement—covering everything from light bulbs to libraries. On 1 October, the start of the 1995 fiscal year, institutions with at least $10 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Energy will be unable to collect more money for indirect costs than in 1994. Although indirect costs are generally a percentage of research funding, the new provision—called a "pause"—applies regardless of whether federal funding rises. The pause is part of a broader White House administrative reform that does not require congressional approval.

Word of the pause has created a stir in science policy circles. Several lobbyists for academia say the White House, by focusing on indirect costs, may fuel legislative efforts to lower reimbursement rates and perhaps rekindle a debate on past reimbursement abuses.

Reefer Madness At FDA

For researchers hoping to explore marijuana's medicinal uses, the last decade was a long, bad trip: The FDA has not approved a marijuana protocol since 1984, and in 1992 it banned "compassionate use" of the drug by terminally ill patients. But the White House now appears to be softening its stance: FDA is negotiating with researchers over a clinical trial of marijuana's use in combating weight loss in AIDS patients.

Not that the FDA ban has completely stymied access to the drug. Many AIDS patients use illegally obtained marijuana, or they can get a prescription for synthetic THC, an active ingredient. But, the jury is out on whether the THC pill, Marinol, is as effective as marijuana for long-term weight gain, says Donald Abrams, a University of California, San Francisco, medical researcher.

So, last fall FDA approved an Abrams protocol to compare Marinol with marijuana. In December, however, Abrams and his colleagues wanted to boost their odds of getting marijuana approved as a drug, so they and FDA negotiated a tougher protocol pitting marijuana against placebo cigarettes. But a scientific advisory group balked at patients inhaling smoke with no benefit to their health. Abrams then settled on a compromise: a 40-person pilot study comparing Marinol to a range of marijuana doses. If FDA approves the new protocol, the trial will start this summer.

Could the trial be FDA's first step toward establishing a scientific basis for reversing the medical-use ban? An Administration spokesman would only confirm the policy is under review.

End of an Era for Asbestos Research?

After getting the cold shoulder from the federal government and the private sector, the largest U.S. program devoted to asbestos research—the Health Effects Institute-Asbestos Research (HEI-AR)—is closing.

Researchers first realized in the 1960s that asbestos was a serious lung cancer threat to insulation workers who inhaled large quantities of microscopic fibers. Since then, scientists have had a tough time establishing whether asbestos in homes and offices poses a significant risk to the general population (*Science*, 15 November 1991, p. 928).

But scientists have agreed that specific populations may be at risk. In a 1991 review, HEI-AR identified janitors and other groups that at times can be heavily exposed to airborne asbestos, and has since developed a research plan. But HEI-AR, authorized by Congress in 1989 to receive $12 million—half from the government and half from the private sector—never received all the money. The feds paid up, but not the asbestos manufacturers, the real estate and insurance industries, or labor unions. Last December, HEI-AR failed to persuade Congress to allow it to spend the federal money without matching funds, so it is now canceling contracts it planned to fund this year.

Despite HEI-AR's demise, scientists are still active in at least one research area: Determining how asbestos fibers cause lung cancer.