



<b>Eye on the Environment</b> By Tom Parker Conservation Director Northwest Connections			<b>Community Conservation Education</b>
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## *Changing Habitats And Human Activity Threaten Bears*

**By Tom Parker**  
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I began guiding bear hunters in the Swan Valley 30 years ago this spring. I had not been in Montana for many years at that time, but I had spent every free moment exploring this amazing piece of country that was referred to by many as the Heart of the Rockies.

As I explored the Swan and Clearwater Valleys, tributary drainages and surrounding mountains, one thing I understood for sure—this was bear country.

Bears were quite literally everywhere I went: black bears and grizzly bears of every color, size and description. Unraveling some of the key relationships of their world has changed my life and notions about many things forever.

I had lived in northern Maine, an area with a high bear density, where I was once treated to observing over a dozen bears while sitting in one spot near the border of Baxter State Park.

In my early explorations of the Swan Valley, it became apparent to me this area held nearly unimaginable concentrations of bears, especially in the spring and early summer, and that as summer came on most of these bears drifted off into the surrounding mountains in search of choice vegetation, insects, ripening berries and pine nuts.

In the summer and fall, I guided and packed in the Bob Marshall wilderness, and I began to piece together habitat relationships there along with the ecological connections between the wilderness and front country.

As I began to understand the seasonal habits of bears in the Swan, I realized that much of their interest in spring and early summer was associated with the rich and diverse wetland environments, which were not available in the same way elsewhere on the larger landscape.

This was no secret to the bears. The mountainous areas flanking the valley, though rich in summer and fall foraging habitats, are still largely snow-covered in spring when the Swan Valley and other lower elevation areas around the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem are green and lush. This helps to explain the spring and early summer concentrations of bears here.

When natural food shortages occurred in the mountains in summer or fall, such as poor berry or pine nut crops, many bears would return to the Swan to utilize foods from the wetlands, riparian areas and other environments.

Many things have changed for bears since I've been observing them here. One of the largest changes has been related to food availability in the mountains and surrounding wilderness areas due

to fire suppression and the loss of whitebark pine. Whitebark pine is a high elevation species responsible for upholding a web of ecological processes.

For bears whitebark pine nuts are critical for reproductive success and for building the fat reserves necessary to survive through winter denning. Although whitebark pine had been heavily affected by blister rust over the previous half-century, many ridges and basins still had a residual population of cone producing trees and were still used heavily by bears only a few short years ago.

The recent mountain pine beetle epidemic has all but collapsed those surviving stands. There has been an observable corresponding abandonment of high country habitats by bears and an increase in their presence in the valley.

At lower elevations, habitat values for bears are also a fraction of what they were even a decade ago in the Swan Valley. Many of their important wetlands and riparian areas have been compromised. Berry crop failures in the last decade due to drought, fungus and other factors have amplified food stress and, when coupled with all other cumulative effects, have pushed bears to desperate behavior. This is a large part of why grizzly and black bears have been so visible in the Swan and other areas around the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem.

Bears are using new and different foods, much of them related to humans such as dog food, garbage, bird feeders, livestock boneyards and hunter and highway killed animals and gutpiles. The resulting conflicts have ended in the deaths of many bears.

Today because of dramatic changes in both front country and backcountry habitats, bears have no choice but to try to meet more of their caloric needs in the valley bottoms and in areas of human settlement.

Cumulative effects from heavy handed forest management, development, vastly increased road densities, fire suppression, forest diseases such as white pine blister rust and invasive weeds, coupled with human intolerance, have combined to impact bears at a landscape scale.

My opinion, as someone whose life and living has been dependent on understanding bears, is that today they are flat out up against it. I believe the better we understand the current stresses on bears across their habitats, the more likely we are to have tolerance and understanding for creatures that are often feared more than understood.

The least we owe these great creatures is our personal effort to minimize the chance our activities will draw a bear into harms way.