

Bear Viewing Guidelines

for Concierges, Village Hosts and Visitor Information Agents

Teaching Points

The following information can be relayed to guests, if the opportunity arises, to enhance their bear viewing experience. For more interesting trivial bits about bears, invite guests to visit our website at www.bearsmart.com or pick up a copy of A Whistler Bear Story or Bearology: Fascinating Bear Facts, Tales & Trivia at the book store or various other shops in Whistler (all proceeds from the sale of these books go toward bear smart programs).

All bears are individuals and like humans, they have different temperaments and senses of personal space. "Critical space" is the area around each bear that they may defend. Keeping a safe distance is always important, but that distance is going to differ between bears and with different situations. One person viewing a bear is likely going to cause less of a disturbance than a large group so the distance will need to be modified accordingly. A good way of knowing what a safe distance is, is one that causes no disturbance or changes in bear behaviour.

Every disturbance, and that includes interruptions in feeding caused by looking up to check out your guests, has an impact on bears. Bears are highly intelligent animals, sensitive to their surroundings and experiences with people. If a feeding bear is constantly looking up to see what the disturbance is, you are interrupting their feeding time and consequently their long term survival. It is not just about the one time your guests are there trying to get a photo; it is the cumulative effect of everyone's actions and regular tours.

Our bears are wild creatures and must be kept as such. Any human behaviour that alters bear behaviour- by altering the foods to which they are accustomed for instance- has long lasting impacts and has the potential to threaten their survival in the wild. If they are not harassed or shot, bears may become habituated to humans, meaning they tolerate the presence of humans. While this tolerance is good for humans that want to view bears at close range, it may put bears at higher risk of being hit by a car or having a close encounter with a human that results in them being shot.

Bears are NOT ferocious. They are NOT mean or malicious. Bears are normally shy, retiring animals that have very little desire to interact with humans. Unless they are forced to be around humans to be near a food source, they usually choose to avoid us.

Bears are very curious and will inspect odours, noises and objects to determine if they are edible or playable. Standing up on its hind legs allows a bear to get more information from its senses of smell, sight and hearing. It is a sign of curiosity, not aggression.

Bears are usually active from dawn to dusk, but they may be seen any time of day or night. Bears in many places of high human use have become nocturnal in order to avoid people. While others have become habituated to people in order to gain access to their plentiful buffet of improperly stored garbage and other attractants.

Bears can be very social. Bears are often described as asocial when compared to wolves, chimps or lions, but to use the term “asocial” to describe bears is incorrect. While bears do not live in extended family groups or join in hunts, they can co-exist in very close proximity to each other and in fact form alliances and friendships - some adult bears have even been known to mentor younger unrelated bears; young unrelated subadults hang around in pairs and even groups (likely because there is strength in numbers). The bears of a region are usually familiar with one another and meetings consist of complex social exchanges. Some bears like each other and other simply don't tolerate one another in their respective home ranges - not unlike people's relationships with each other.

Bears are not territorial. Being territorial means keeping other members of your species away from a given area. Wolves and primates are territorial – bears are not. Bears, like people, share home ranges. This mutual use of land and resources is a basis for bear social behaviour.

Bears live in a dominance hierarchy based on age, size and temperament. Mature males are at the top of the hierarchy, and sub-adults and cubs at the bottom. Bears establish and maintain their social position and place in the hierarchy by “acting” aggressively. Single females and subadults are almost always submissive to mature males but have a loose hierarchy within their own group.

Bears react to new things in their environment. New objects or situations often frighten bears. Behaviourists call this "strange object response." After an initial fright, bears will often investigate what alarmed them. This is not an aggressive act and shouldn't be regarded as one.

Bears are not always aware. Bears, particularly adult grizzlies bears, are not always aware of what is going on around them. A bear following a trail doesn't always look ahead. He may be distracted by a yummy food source or may not be able to hear over the loud sounds of rushing water or blowing wind. A bear can literally blunder into an unsuspecting person.

Questions? Please contact Sylvia Dolson, Executive Director of the Get Bear Smart Society, sdolson@bearsmart.com.

