



**PART THREE**

*The West We Want:  
Creating a Culture  
Worthy of Place*



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## *Respecting and Honouring the Great Bear*

### **The Grizzly as a Symbol of the West We Want**

#### **STROLLING BEAR**

The mountain West would not be the same if the Great Bear disappeared from our midst. The very thought of its existence is what brings people from all over the world to the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Site. The grizzly is a symbol of what is unique about where and how we live in the Rockies. Its presence informs our literature and inspires our art. Some of the best images we have of the grizzly bear are not photographs. This remarkable image, called *Strolling Bear*, is one of a series of paintings by Edmonton artist Nancy Burford.

*The image appears courtesy of the artist.*

TO ENSURE OUR IDENTITY AS A PEOPLE, what we want the West to be like in the future must include the presence of the great bear. The grizzly bear is the single most prominent symbol of what we saved in the mountain West. Without the grizzly the West would not be wild. Without the great bear we would soon become another anyplace in an increasingly homogenized world. Coming to terms with what we share with the grizzly, however, is a serious meditation, but essential for those who would define the current and future importance of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site to our understanding of where and how we live. Because our views of the great bear and how we might share our existence with it have been shaped by them, that meditation might begin with consideration of what those who came before Euro-Canadians thought about the grizzly.

#### **SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS TO THE BEAR**

IN MANY NORTH AMERICAN Native cultures, specific responsibilities concerning relationship radiate outward from the individual to the immediate family, the extended family, the band, the clan and the tribal

group. Relationships within most Native cultures, however, do not stop with the human realm. By necessity they extend beyond, into the environment. Native peoples developed special connections to the land, animals, plants, the sky and the elements.<sup>1</sup> Central among these were the relationships they had with the animals that provided their food and all their other material needs. Animals, however, were more than just sources of food. Animals aid Native peoples in their everyday lives and appear in their dreams and meditations. Because they were created before humans, animals are considered closer to the sources of all life and can, through their powers, act as allies, guides and familiars in the search for individual wholeness.

While this may appear, at first, to be a simple proposition to which we might aspire, it is not. Despite contemporary claims to the contrary, this is not an easy connection to develop and sustain. It requires generations of careful observation of the land and intimate knowledge of the behaviour of all the major animals with which you share your habitat. Then you have to gradually draw on that behaviour as a basis for examining and strengthening human traits and purifying human desires. Through fasts and vision quests, you have to derive your own spiritual nature from the power embodied in the animals around you. If you practice the above for thousands of years, you can create a religion based on your relationship to animals. Each animal teaches Native peoples a different lesson. In the West there are buffalo lessons and elk lessons. You can learn from the beaver and from the wolf. If you are very special, you can aspire to the power of the bear.

It is not only Native North Americans who have had this relationship with the bear. Anthropologists have discovered that when it comes to bears, there are a great number of similarities in the cultures of boreal peoples throughout the Northern Hemisphere. The bear appears in initiation and healing ceremonies, in shamanic rites, in the quest for spirit guardians and in various ritual dances.<sup>2</sup> There are also similarities between many cultures in the rites associated with the hunting of bears, and similar tales and myths have surfaced in widely separated geographical regions that associate the bear with various aspects of human thought and action.

As David Rockwell indicates in *Giving Voice To Bear*,<sup>3</sup> bears and First Nations people have been sharing habitat for a very long time. Both have walked the same trails, drank and fished out of the same streams, dug out and fed on the same roots and harvested the same berries, seeds and nuts for thousands of years. A great mutual respect developed between



#### **ENCOUNTERING THE GREAT BEAR**

A great effort is being made throughout the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site to transcend outdated public perspectives with respect to the threat the grizzly represents to visitor safety in and around our national and provincial parks and protected areas. While the Great Bear must be respected always, it is not the aggressive and blood-thirsty brute it has been made out to be over the last century by hunters and yarn-spinning outdoorsmen.

*Photograph by wildlife photographer Brian Wolitski for the Year of the Great Bear.*

Native peoples and bears. Nowhere is this more true than with the grizzly.

#### **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BEARS AND HUMANS**

THE FIRST THING THAT WAS apparent to Aboriginal peoples was how similar bears are to people. The body of the bear is disturbingly similar to the body of a human. When skinned, grizzlies look rather like stalky, powerful, short-legged men. Bears can walk upright and, like humans, they have binocular vision. Their hind feet are very human-like and the prints they leave in soft mud or melting snow can appear surprisingly like ones that might be left by a man.<sup>4</sup> Bears are dexterous and can rotate their forepaws. There is even evidence that they may use tools.<sup>5</sup> Native observers also noticed that bears snore when they sleep, just like tired people.

Native peoples further observed that bears have a relatively long infancy. They also have a fierce maternal devotion that is not unlike what people show to their children. Bear cubs stay with their mothers twice as long as other large mammals of comparable size. This is likely because so much of what a bear knows is probably learned as opposed to being instinctual. There were also critical similarities in diet between people and bears. They often ate the same proportions of certain foods.



### **TRACKING THE GREAT BEAR**

Colleen Campbell is a volunteer researcher who works under the direction of Dr. Mike Gibeau, a grizzly bear expert working with Parks Canada in Banff National Park. By knowing where the bears are travelling and what they are eating, park managers can minimize the threat of human contact. As we learn the seasonal habits and food preferences of resident grizzly populations, we can learn to live safely in their midst.

*Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

The diet of bears is often composed of 80 percent vegetable matter. The diets of Native groups using the same habitat were often composed of 70 percent vegetable matter. It has been suggested that people ate marginally more meat in these circumstances simply because they were better at obtaining it.<sup>6</sup> According to some First Nations groups, bears are just like people except that these furry relatives do not make fire.

### **THE BEAR AS HEALER**

THOUGH EUROPEAN CULTURES seldom think this way, in many Native cultures the great bear is seen more as a healer than a threat. It was out of the bear's remarkable capacity for self-healing that the myth of the Medicine Bear emerged. It was clear to careful Native observers that the bear knew the secrets of plants. In many Native myths, the bear is portrayed as the plant gatherer, a mysterious herbalist gathering medicines straight from nature. Here is what the Lakota man Two Shields observed about the herbal knowledge possessed by the great bear:

*The bear is quick-tempered and is fierce in many ways, and yet he pays attention to herbs which no other animal notices at all. The bear digs these for his own use. The*

*bear is the only animal which eats roots from the earth and is also especially fond of acorns, Juneberries and cherries. These three are frequently compounded with other herbs in making medicine and if a person is fond of cherries we say he is like a bear. We consider the bear as chief of all the animals in regard to herb medicine, and therefore it is understood that if a man dreams of a bear he will be expert in the use of herbs for curing illness. The bear is regarded as an animal well acquainted with herbs because no other animal has such good claws for digging roots.<sup>7</sup>*

Bears also represent a spiritual symbol for many First Nations people. Bears are ancient and possess an earlier and more vibrant proximity to the Great Spirit at the heart of the world's mystery. Many Native initiation rites seek to bestow upon a novice the wisdom the bear received through its ritual death. In such rites, the individual is removed from his or her family and village and goes alone to a special place. In their extended isolation, candidates for spiritual enlightenment often go without food or water. Such isolation and deprivation serve as a ritual death during which the novice is visited by what may later become a guiding animal spirit. Assuming one survives this trial, he or she is born into a new life and new status within the tribe.

#### **HUNTING THE BEAR**

NATIVE PEOPLES ALSO HUNTED bears. Before the arrival of the horse and the gun this was a very dangerous proposition with highly significant ritual association. Every hunter knew the physical and spiritual power of the bear. There was a good chance a hunter would be mauled or killed in simply approaching such an aggressive animal. Still, there was nothing more heroic. Killing a bear was often celebrated as a more courageous act than killing a man or taking a scalp in battle. A hunter could possess no greater trophy than a bear-claw necklace. In killing a bear, you took the life of something more ancient and perhaps greater than yourself.

Among the Blackfoot Tribes, the grizzly has been called the Real Bear. The black bear was not held in anything close to the same esteem. The killing of the Real Bear was a sacred act and during the hunt, the name of the bear was never spoken. Instead he was called Old Grandfather, Old Man, Old Honey Paws, or simply Crooked Tail. This tradition of not naming the bear is common in tribal cultures throughout the circumpolar world. You did not speak the name of the bear, for the bear would hear you, for he heard and understood the languages of all the Native peoples. Today, there are yet clans and societies within tribes for

whom it is taboo to name the Real Bear. Those who know the bear best do not speak of him, except euphemistically, and then only with the greatest of respect.

Though customs differ, the Native peoples of the coast also possess a great respect for the great bear. Traditionally, grizzlies are considered the closest animal relative to humans. On the rare occasion they were hunted, special rituals and songs were offered preceding the kill. A successful hunt was usually followed by a ceremonial feast.

### **BIRTH AND REBIRTH**

AFTER OBSERVING THE BEAR over centuries, humans began to realize the bear was a symbol not just of the survival of winter. It was a symbol that hinted at a solution to the largest question of them all – the question of what lies beyond death.

The enigmatic bear, more than any other teacher, enacted the answer to this question. It passed into the earth each autumn and endured the death of winter and emerged again in the spring. When the bear emerged, it appeared that the winter had little effect on it and sometimes the miracle was double, for the bear often emerged with young. Birth and rebirth. Somehow the bear knew when to retire from the world and when to re-enter. It seemed to emerge before the snowmelt, as though its very heat initiated the spring. The first tendrils of spring vegetation seemed to rise from the ground for the bear's pleasure. The departing snow revealed the frozen carcasses of reindeer, moose, bighorn, and deer.

It was clear that the bear was a master of renewal whose life cycle was tied to the wheel of the seasons. It had knowledge of when to die and when to be reborn. In the winter den it did not eat, drink or excrete. Its entire life followed the solar cycle. Was the she-bear's meticulous motherhood a sign? Was the bear's behaviour a sign?<sup>8</sup>

If you lived in a pre-literature society of primitive hunters seeking to make sense of an often-hostile world, the behaviour of the bear could not fail to impress. This behaviour might also inspire the beginnings of what might later be defined as religious feelings. According to Shepard and Sanders, the powers of the bear and its relationship to humans become embedded in early morality stories in almost all early circum-polar cultures.



#### A GRIZZLY WITH TWO CUBS

While most visitors consider the grizzly bear to be a uniquely mountain species, its range in the Canadian West was originally concentrated on the Great Plains. The Rockies are actually marginal habitat for the Great Bear and as such can be considered its last stand in the interior of North America. Due to their low reproductive rates, their diverse habitat needs and their expansive inter-jurisdictional range requirements, bears are good indicators of overall ecosystem health. The stability of bear populations is now seen as a measure of how well we are protecting the integrity of our mountain ecosystems.

*Photograph courtesy of Parks Canada.*

#### ENCOUNTERING THE “REAL BEAR”

THOUGH IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SURPRISING if earlier explorers had not seen one, the first European to record seeing a grizzly was a young Hudson’s Bay Company apprentice named Henry Kelsey. Poor and uneducated though

he was, Kelsey made some very important natural history observations in Canada. Kelsey was the first European to see the marvel that is now known as the Canadian prairies. On August 20, 1691, he was also the first to see a bison in what is now the Canadian West. The same day, a hundred and fourteen years before the first specimen was collected by the Lewis and Clark Expedition on May 5, 1805, twenty-year-old Henry Kelsey saw his first grizzly bear. Kelsey’s journal is written in verse. His entry for August 20, 1691 is the first description of the grizzly in the English language:

*To day we pichet to ye outtermost Edge of ye woods  
this plain affords Nothing but short Round  
sticky grass and Buffillo & a great sort of a Bear w  
is Bigger than any white Bear & is Neither White  
nor Black But silver hair’d like our English  
Rabbit ye Buffillo Likewise is not like those to ye  
Northward their horns growing like and English  
Ox but Black & short<sup>9</sup>*

Any resemblance the grizzly had with an English rabbit rather ended with comparisons of size and the colour of its coat. Kelsey went back and did a rhymed introduction to his journals of 1691. It is obvious that it didn’t take long for Kelsey to learn about the ferocious nature of the great bear:

*And then you have beast of severall kind  
The one is a black a Buffillo great  
Anotherr is an outgrown Bear w, is good meat*

*His skin to gett I have used all ye, means I can  
He is mans food & he makes food of man<sup>10</sup>*

The grizzly instantly became a popular symbol of what had to be put right in the West if it was to be settled. The bear also became part of an emerging heroic mythology associated with developing European skill in coming to grips with the dangers of the Wild West. Guidebooks for missionaries and travellers, often written by people who had never seen a bear, became commonplace. In the literature of the day and in the popular press, the terrible image of the bear quickly began to shape what people expected to hear about travel in the North American West. Published exploration accounts were deemed incomplete if they didn't offer at least one story of a bear encounter. The more exotic the tale, the better. Though it would be easy to question the veracity of many of the early published stories, some stand out for their capacity to describe the remarkable behaviour of the great bear. The stories also lead, ultimately, in the direction of truth.

#### **THE BEAR'S EMBRACE**

AN INTERESTING EARLY BEAR story that is sometimes told in Jasper concerns an early fur trader named Ross Cox who, after working with John Jacob Aster's American Fur Company at Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia, decided to join their Canadian rivals, the North West Company. Cox crossed Athabasca Pass from west to east with the fur brigade in 1817. It is not Jasper that is at the heart of the story but an encounter with a grizzly, which took place in the area of the Flathead River in the spring of 1816. This tale tells us two things. It explains the extent to which Native peoples conflicted with bears and it gives definition to the terrible embrace of the bear that later became known as the "bear's hug." The suggestion that Native peoples lived in some sort of primeval harmony with all the creatures with which they shared the mountain West is not supported by the Ross Cox account:

*I have seen several of our hunters, as well as many Indians, who have been dreadfully lacerated in their encounters with bears: some have been deprived of their ears, other had their noses nearly torn off, and a few have been completely blinded. From the scarcity of food in the spring months they are then more savage than at any other season; and during that period it is a highly dangerous experiment to approach them.<sup>11</sup>*

From this account we learn that bears are more aggressive in the spring. Cox surmises that this is probably due to the shortage of food. It has not yet occurred to anyone that this may also be due to the fierce female defence of the young. The rest of the story concerns ten Canadian fur traders and one of their number, “pauvre Louisson,” who felt the bear’s terrible embrace:

*The third evening after quitting the fort, while they were quietly sitting around a blazing fire eating a hearty dinner of deer, a large half-famished bear cautiously approached the group from behind an adjacent tree; and before they were aware of his presence, he sprang across the fire, seized one of the men (who had a well-furnished bone in his hand) round the waist, with the two fore paws, and ran about fifty yards with him on his hind legs before he stopped. His comrades were so thunder-struck at the unexpected appearance of such a visitor, and his sudden retreat with “pauvre Louisson,” that they for some time lost all presence of mind, and, in a state of fear and confusion, were running to and fro, each expecting in his turn to be kidnapped in a similar manner; when at length Baptiste Le Blanc, a half-breed hunter, seized his gun, and was in the act of firing at the bear, but was stopped by some of the others, who told him he would inevitably kill their friend in the position in which he was then placed. During this parley Bruin relaxed his grip of the captive, whom he kept securely under him, and very leisurely began picking the bone which the latter had dropped. Once or twice Louisson attempted to escape, which only caused the bear to watch him more closely; but on his making another attempt, he again seized Louisson round the waist, and commenced giving him one of those infernal embraces which generally end in death. The poor fellow was now in great agony, and vented the most frightful screams; and observing Baptiste with his gun ready, anxiously watching a safe opportunity to fire, he cried out, “Tire! Tire! mon chere, si tur m’aimes. Tire, pour l’amour du bon Dieu! A la tete a la tete!” This was enough for Le Blanc, who instantly let fly, and hit the bear over the right temple. He fell, and at the same moment dropped Louisson; but he gave him a right ugly scratch with his claws across the face, which for some time afterwards spoiled his beauty. After the shot, Le Blanc darted to his comrade’s assistance, and with his “couteau de chasse” quickly finished the sufferings of the man stealer, and rescued his friend from impending death; for with the exception of the above-mentioned scratch, he escaped uninjured.<sup>12</sup>*

## THE CANADIAN VERSUS THE AMERICAN BEAR

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE repeating rifle marked the beginning of the end for most grizzly populations in the United States. Surviving bears became more wary and their range retracted into the mountains. Everywhere they were, however, they were hunted. Soon the trappers and miners were replaced by homesteaders and ranchers who shot bears on sight. The livestock industry began to expand grazing into the

last niches in which the grizzly still remained. By 1920, the bear was eliminated from most of its former American range.

Canadians are sometimes smug about the fact that we still have grizzly bears. Their smugness is unwarranted. In Canada, the attitude toward bears was not much different than it was in the United States. During the fur trade era, bear hides were legal tender in what is now Western Canada. Hudson's Bay Company records tell us much about the abundance of the grizzly on the plains and in the mountains prior to the coming of the railroad. Bears were sometimes taken in great numbers. During the winter of 1871–72, records indicate that some 750 grizzly bear hides were taken in the area of the Cypress Hills in what is now southwestern Saskatchewan.<sup>13</sup> The grizzly disappeared quickly from the Great Plains in Canada. The same myths and biases about the ferocious nature of the grizzly were just as much a part of folk culture here as they were further south.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885 initiated a wave of prairie settlement. The bears of the Great Plains disappeared soon after. Fewer people and a slower rate of settlement, however, left space in the mountains for bears. The prevalent attitude toward the grizzly remained an openly hostile one. People looked for excuses to kill them.

When the great Himalayan explorer and mountaineer, Dr. Tom Longstaff, came to the Canadian Rockies in the summer of 1910, he brought with him the typical bias of the day concerning bears. They were relentless, bloodthirsty killers and that was all there was to it. Though he had to seek high and low just to find a grizzly, Longstaff still deemed it an act of self-defence to kill one. In fact, he likely only wanted the trophy and the bragging rights. Here's how Longstaff described killing three bears in one day in the Bugaboo Pass area of the Purcell Range southwest of Banff:

*Suddenly I saw three grizzlies emerge from the timber, below and ahead of me, slowly making their way uphill. Running along the ridge till I got above them I sneaked down as near as I could get unseen. Grizzlies run with their dam for a full two years, and I now saw that the party consisted of an old dam with two three-quarter-grown cubs. I could never expect a more exciting introduction. I was not disappointed. Grizzlies are unattractive and dangerous brutes; moreover they were a serious menace to our horses. Not only will grizzlies attack them but also horses are easily stampeded by bears and we might lose them for days. I took the dam first and rolled her head over heels down the slope. Thinking her dead I took the biggest youngster, but only broke its foreleg. However, the old dam got up and came roaring up-hill towards me. They were now all giving tongue and the result was far more appalling than all the six*



#### **INTERPENETRATING PRESENCES**

Researchers have observed that grizzly bear behaviour has been changing in response to the growing presence of people in parts of the mountain West. In areas where grizzly and human habitat regularly overlaps, bears are becoming more nocturnal. Bears can also be present but seldom seen, as is the case when they concentrate their activity in the bush or out of sight near heavily used trails. This appears to be particularly true in and on the margins of mountain communities inside and outside of the World Heritage Site.

*Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

*tigers I have met put together. Perhaps in consequence of the savage noise they made it took me two more shots to finish the old one. Then another for the youngster. The third unwounded one was now pretty close and roaring like a fiend. Its nose was full of porcupine quills, which may have soured its temper. It required a second shot too, but it never got up to me.<sup>14</sup>*

The hunting of bears was no longer a sacred rite, as it was in the days when the bear was a respected symbol of a prior human relationship to nature. Bears were hunted out of a practical need to protect livestock or to preserve community security. Bears were also eagerly hunted simply for sport.

Attitudes toward bears and toward wildlife as a whole would not begin to change until both became greatly depleted in the West. Only the creation of the world's first national parks, in Yellowstone in 1872 and Banff in 1885, offered the great bear respite from overwhelming pressure on its range and threats to its very survival.

#### **THE CREATION OF OUR NATIONAL PARKS**

WHILE IT WAS CLEAR BY THE 1870S that settlement was changing the West dramatically, the creation of national parks in North America was not inspired by a movement to preserve western wildlife. At least not at first. The object of the first national parks was, primarily, the preservation of scenery. The impetus toward this preservation was Niagara

Falls. As early as 1830, it was noted that the continent's greatest known natural treasure was being beaten to death by "sharpsters," "hucksters" and private developers who acquired the grandest views, then forced visitors to pay exorbitantly just to watch the water fall.<sup>15</sup> Things would be different in the West. The grand scenery would be protected for all time for everyone to see.

Despite the creation of these reserves, wildlife was vanishing from the West at an unprecedented rate. Part of the problem was that animals were not even safe in the newly created parks. Under the influence of the livestock industry, predator control programs were introduced in the mountain national parks to ensure that "vermin" in the form of wolves and coyotes would not spill out of these reserves into neighbouring ranch and farm country. The programs were very successful. It soon became apparent that it was not only the buffalo that had disappeared from the West. Almost every other wild species was also in decline. The popular image of the Wild West was under siege. This problem did not go away with the creation of national parks.

#### **DO NOT FEED THE BEARS**

THE PROBLEM OF BEAR FEEDING is as old as our national parks. The moment bears stopped being hunted in national parks, they became less wary of people. It soon became clear to the bears that they could feed on garbage provided they did not injure people in so doing.

The arrival of the automobile institutionalized the bear problem in our national parks. Black bears very quickly came to identify an automobile with food. They took to sitting cutely on the roadside waiting for passing cars. When the cars stopped, they would amble over and wait for handouts. Enthralled visitors couldn't help themselves. They began to compete with one another to get the best photographs of people feeding a begging bear. The food was rich and nutritious. The bears liked it. When the cars stopped coming, the bears started to hit campsites and to come into town to look for food. When Park Superintendent S.J. Clarke and Chief Game Guardian Howard Sibbald drove a party of Ottawa officials to observe the killing of a problem bear west of Banff in July 1915, it made big news in the local newspaper. The female black bear that was the source of the problem was killed and her two cubs deposited in the Banff Zoo.<sup>16</sup> Though the park service could hardly have seen it at the time, this was the beginning of a vicious circle that has yet to be broken in the mountain national parks. Unwitting or uninformed



#### BEAR FEEDING

Since the inception of Canada's national parks system in 1885, park managers have been fighting what sometimes seems like a losing war against the human habituation of wildlife. While photographs like this are now actively discouraged in the mountain parks, they were once the mainstay of the tourism souvenir trade.

*Photograph from the Byron Harmon Collection courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.*

visitors feed bears, the bears become habituated to human food, they start taking it wherever they can find it and, in order to preserve the safety of those who started the feeding in the first place, the bear has to be killed.

In 1916, park wardens reported that the town of Banff was literally “overrun” with bears. The policy of shooting problem bears on sight was initiated in some parks. In February of 1918, Parks Commissioner J.B. Harkin granted blanket permission for wardens to kill all bears “encountered, roaming at large, within any townsite in your park.”<sup>17</sup> Wardens were also given blanket permission to shoot any bear found raiding provisions or stores outside of townsites. Though wardens were instructed to go to great lengths to justify killings outside of townsites, growing human presence in the parks had defined parks policy. Bears were to be killed if they posed a problem to people – even though it was people offering food who first posed the problem to the bear.

By the mid 1920s, black bears had become the delight of visiting motorists. Stories abounded of their boldness. Visitors, for the most part, thought them cute. Park officials knew they had a problem on their hands. In 1928, superintendents from the mountain national parks

gathered to discuss the problem and to make recommendations that would reduce the threat to public safety and minimize government liability without compromising the thrill visitors got from seeing bears. Their conclusions are interesting even today:

*... bears should be killed only after they become a nuisance; the decision on that point to rest, as at present, with the Superintendent. It is understood that the Superintendent will at all times exercise the best judgment with a view to protecting the public and at the same time see that there will be enough of non-dangerous bears to provide the thrill that the tourists get from seeing live bears in the open.... It is deemed good policy to endeavor to educate the public through Parks literature and especially through the chauffeurs operating in the Parks as to the danger of bears and other wild animals. It is specially important that the number of bears frequenting outlying camp grounds should be kept down because the danger there is much more serious than in the larger camp grounds. It is not deemed worth while [sic] yet to develop a policy of killing bears in the fall or other suitable time in order that a revenue be derived from their skins. It is considered that warning posters should be erected, especially with a view to protecting the Department against claims for damages.<sup>18</sup>*

#### **FOOD AND GARBAGE**

IT WAS IN THE MID 1930S that the American live trap concept of removing problem bears began to be employed in Canadian national parks. A large metal box on wheels, called the Black Maria, was built for the use of wardens and put into wide use. Bears were trapped and moved to remote areas. Not all park superintendents were completely sold on this new technique. Though devices of this kind are still in use, some of the more enlightened superintendents of the day argued that it might be just as effective to burn garbage so that bears would no longer be attracted to towns, campgrounds and dumps. This, too, would become parks policy, but not until much later when the problem of increasing visitation demanded wholesale rethinking of bear-management strategies.

The bear problem continued to grow after World War II when visitation increased and the car began to replace the train as the most popular and economical way to travel to the mountain national parks. Visitation to Banff National Park increased nearly ten-fold from 1900 to 1950.<sup>19</sup> In terms of bear-management issues the main problem was garbage. Visitors wanted to see bears and dumps became the place they went to see them. Some of the larger accommodations, like Jasper Park Lodge, had their own dumps and encouraged select guests to visit them if they hadn't already seen bears on the golf course or among the cabins on

the property. Bears often congregated in these places in huge numbers. Jasper Park Wardens once reported seeing twenty-four bears at one time at the Jasper Park Lodge, and the situation was not much different in many other places in the mountain national parks.<sup>20</sup>

The popularity of bears in Jasper and the extent to which they were fed at Jasper Park Lodge during this period is well documented in *The Bears of Jasper*, a travel book written by a freelance journalist named Harper Cory and published by Thomas Nelson and Sons in 1946. Cory was a nature writer with some twenty books to his credit when he came to Jasper, likely at the expense of Canadian National Railway, to write entertaining little book on the “Jasper Comedians,” the black bears at Jasper Park Lodge that frequented the park roadways in order to entertain visitors. Some of the pictures in this book, which show people feeding animals, would make the hair on the back of the neck stand up, for any contemporary student of bear problems in the national parks today. There are bears standing at the doors of cabins at Jasper Park Lodge begging for food from nattily dressed guests, staff feeding groups of bears, and small children face-to-face with begging cubs. While such antics would be unthinkable today, Cory’s book typifies the attitude of the time toward bears in the mountain national parks. Here is how Cory introduces us to the black bears of Jasper National Park:

*The wild bear in his native habitat is a more accomplished entertainer than the animal in the circus or the zoo. The latter, educated to perform rote actions and responses; his inventiveness is killed in ratio to the speed with which his life is forced into a groove. The wild bear, especially in a district where he is treated with consideration, as in Jasper and other of the National Parks of Canada, is a walking mass of inventiveness, liable to spring all manner of surprises in his urgent desire to attract attention of the right sort – that is, attention accompanied by sweet edibles. He knows more amusing tricks than any man could teach him, and he rarely exhibits them needlessly. He is the world’s most accomplished mendicant, but he will work – not too hard of course – for his reward. Therein, his behaviour most resembles that of human beings.<sup>21</sup>*

What Harper Cory and other writers of popular works on wildlife of the day didn’t understand was that the feeding of these animals was beginning to cause serious problems in the mountain national parks in both Canada and the United States. Once bears were habituated to garbage in places like Jasper they became problems along roadsides, in campgrounds, outlying lodges and even in town. The problem was aggravated in the early fall when Jasper Park Lodge closed for the season. Bears got hungry and then got aggressive. Attempts to close the

dumps only made matters worse. The bears went into town where it was even harder to control them without having to shoot them. As visitation remained relatively small and the summer season was short, it took a long time to seriously address the problem.

In 1958, strategies were developed to eliminate park garbage dumps as food sources for bears and parks started down the long road toward closing dumps and developing bear-proof garbage containers. They also started a campaign to encourage visitors to understand the problems associated with feeding bears. Similar problems in the American national parks led to the creation of a national bear-management strategy in 1960 which sought to reduce conflicts between humans and bears through more efficient garbage removal, better visitor information, removal of problem bears and stricter enforcement of the feeding regulations. National Parks in both Canada and the United States began taking a new approach to managing bears. Instead of demanding constant changes in the behaviour of the bear only, park managers began to consider how changes in human behaviour might improve chances of bears and people sharing common habitat safely. It has taken a long time, however, to change human habits and to improve the handling and management of garbage throughout our national parks. Nearly fifty years have passed since these policies were initiated. We still have a long way to go in fulfilling them.

Between 1885 and 1950, bear management in the national parks relied almost completely on the experience and judgment of local government officials and park wardens. While scientists were sometimes invited to offer advice on policy matters, their input was limited and occasional. This is not to suggest that science was absent from this era in the history of North American national parks. Parks in both the United States and Canada had been exhaustively surveyed. Much was known about the geological and topographical features of early reserves and, in some cases, this research had been followed up with work on botany, zoology and fisheries. The science of ethology, or animal behaviour, was not well developed in North America and the bear posed special problems with respect to research.

During the first half of the twentieth century, national park wildlife was largely divided into two categories: good animals and bad. Because they did not pose a threat to humans and provided reliable hunting, elk, moose and deer were considered good. On the bad side of the ledger were coyotes and wolves, which were largely considered vermin. For much of this period it was acceptable to shoot these animals on sight,

even in national parks. The bear was rather in the middle of this artificial hierarchy. Though they were respected by hunters and by visitors alike, they were not considered game. Nor were they persecuted as wolves were. As historian Paul Schullery has indicated, there was little concern for their numbers beyond the commonly held desire to reduce them.<sup>22</sup> The fact they were widely regarded as a nuisance combined with their unpredictable and sometimes-ornery character did not qualify them immediately as desirable subjects for extensive research.

Given the limited nature of the research tools scientists possessed there wasn't much they could do with bears. Following them around was just too dangerous. It might be possible to observe them briefly on roadsides or at dumps, but no way existed to reliably identify individuals at a distance, to determine their movements, seasonal range, natural feeding habits or mating behaviour. It was impossible to even tell exactly how many bears there were in any given area. This did not prevent scientists from looking longingly at the problem of bear behaviour and management. In 1943, after a group of Banff residents petitioned the government to shoot or remove all bears in the town, the National Parks Service in Canada put forward the name of Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan from the University of British Columbia to review its bear-management policies.<sup>23</sup> This proposal, however, did not involve collection of data.

#### **APPLYING SCIENCE**

THE FIRST FORMAL RESEARCH undertaken in a North American national park was initiated in Yellowstone in 1944 by the legendary naturalist Olaus Murie. Murie had begun wildlife research in Yellowstone during the 1930s with a study he conducted on coyotes. He applied the same systematic field techniques to the study of bears. While Murie did not have the tools to positively identify individual bears over the long term, he was able to make some important observations on the diet of bears based on examination of their droppings, or scats. Murie determined definitively that bears were largely vegetarian. Even though he was unable to include a representative sample of spring scats in his study, Murie concluded that about 81 percent of a bear's diet was composed of plant matter.<sup>24</sup> Murie also arrived at some very interesting conclusions regarding the behaviour of bears in dumps and campgrounds. He was the first to propose that Yellowstone bears could survive very nicely on natural foods. Murie proposed that the bear

problems in the park could be greatly reduced through closing dumps and removing attractants like garbage from campgrounds and service centres.<sup>25</sup> He also went on to suggest that driving bears away from food sources such as dumps would not solve the bear problem if other artificial food sources remained available to them. Years ahead of his time, Murie also encouraged mechanisms for bear proofing campgrounds and other sources of garbage and food. He even went on to propose electric fencing to prevent bears from accessing camps and lodges. More than twenty years would pass before the wisdom of Murie's simple logic would be realized. By then the cost of ignoring this simple advice would cost the lives of a large proportion of the grizzly bear population.

Serious research into grizzly and black bear behaviour would have to wait for two important innovations. The first was the development of a safe and reliable mechanism of immobilizing bears without lasting effects on the bear or on the researcher. To conduct effective, long-term research you had to be able to get a bear sedated, weigh it, take a tooth so that its age could be determined, take urine samples, tattoo the lip and put a tag in the ear, without the bear coming to and killing you. The first experiments in this kind of research were rough and tumble affairs. In *The Grizzly Bear*, Thomas McNamee tells of the travails of Albert Erickson, the first bear researcher in the United States. One wonders how many assistants he would go through in season with these kinds of conditions:

*When Albert W. Erickson, then a graduate student at Michigan State University, began the first serious modern bear study in 1952, he and his crew trapped their black bears in foot snares and had to wrestle them to the ground to clap an ether-soaked mask over their muzzles. Too little ether, and the bear could wake up suddenly, with imaginable results. Too much, and the bear departed with equal celerity for paradise. In a 1978 article for National Wildlife magazine, Peter Steinhart reported that of the first hundred bears Erickson handled, "ten suffered broken bones, including two whose shattered jaws had to be bolted back together. Two bears died of heat prostration, one of strangling by handlers, and two were shot by hunters who didn't know they were in foot traps." Artificial respiration brought several more of Erickson's bears back from the far side of never.<sup>26</sup>*

One wonders what the bears thought of all this. These humans had obviously gone berserk. Dealing with researchers was clearly as dangerous as confronting a motorcycle gang. When, at last, improved veterinary anaesthetics such as the drug Sernylan were perfected, bear research was able to take a more effective turn. As these drugs could be administered from a distance, researchers were no longer required to

wrestle bears into submission before they could be tranquillized. This meant that research could begin, not just on black bears, but also on grizzlies.

The second technological breakthrough to aid bear research emerged from the Cold War space race. Once miniature radio transmitters became available, it became possible to implant animals with radio collars and to trace their activities day and night, in good weather and bad, through expanded spring, summer and autumn range and even to discover denning sites.

### **BEAR RESEARCH IN YELLOWSTONE**

FULL-SCALE RESEARCH USING this technology to study the behaviour, feeding habits, mating rituals, range needs and the nature of aggression in bears did not begin until the late 1950s. In 1958, the U.S. Parks Service contracted a small team of scientists led by John Craighead to study grizzlies in Yellowstone National Park. At the time, Craighead was a professor of bioecology at Montana State University, a member of the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit and an employee of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Funding for the work to be undertaken by Dr. Craighead and his team came from a diverse variety of sources that included The National Geographic Society, the Boone and Crockett Club, the New York Zoological Society, the National Science Foundation, the Atomic Energy Commission and others, as well as the National Parks Service.

Employing all the new technology made available by the study's sponsors, John Craighead, his brother Frank, and a variety of colleagues made rapid progress in pioneering the study methods that would be used by generations of later bear researchers. On the morning of September 22, 1961, after two years of working closely with aerospace engineers, the Craigheads were able to attach a two-ounce radio transmitter and a fourteen-ounce battery pack on a specially designed collar to a female grizzly who they had dubbed Bear Number Forty.<sup>27</sup> After recovering from the anaesthetic, the world's first radio-collared grizzly wobbled off into a permanent place in history. Overnight, modern grizzly research was born.

Over the next eight years, the Craigheads studied the behaviour of twenty-four different Yellowstone grizzlies. Their work would not stop there. Over the next decades the Craigheads' work would generate enormous controversy, especially within the U.S. Parks Service, as



#### **THE FUTURE OF THE GREAT BEAR**

In preserving the Great Bear, we preserve our own unique heritage and sense of place, and assure a sustainable tourism future. As undisturbed ecosystems are now seen to be central to moderating or even slowing climate change effect, in saving our natural places, it may turn out that our natural places will save us.

*Photograph courtesy of Parks Canada.*

dumps were closed and bears began to disappear in numbers. In the end, however, the work conducted by the Craigheads would become the foundation for much of what is known about grizzlies in Yellowstone and elsewhere in North America today, including the Rocky Mountain parks in Canada.

#### **BEAR ATTACKS: THEIR CAUSES AND AVOIDANCE**

GRIZZLY BEAR RESEARCH in Canada's mountain parks came into its own with a book published by a Professor of Environmental Science and Biology at the University of Calgary in 1985. The moment it was released, Stephen Herrero's *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance* began to reshape the way people thought about bears.<sup>28</sup> The approach that Herrero used in his famous book is very interesting. Herrero realized that people had a primal fear of bears. He also knew that the media was obsessed with bear maulings. (Even today, the forty thousand deaths a year caused by automobile accidents do not get media attention. A bear mauling, even though it is less likely to happen to you than being struck by lightning, is instant front-page news.) Though he must have

occasionally winced, Herrero did not back away from the gruesome nature of his subject area.

By carefully classifying the kinds of encounters people had with black bears and grizzlies and by scientifically assessing the behaviour of both bears and humans in each of these circumstances, Herrero proved you could look at these situations and learn from them. Herrero's observations suggest that conscious and pre-meditated malice toward humans is probably outside the mental capacity of bears. Through his work, Herrero broke through outdated myths associated with bear aggression and allowed a generation of campers, hikers and backpackers to rethink the role they could play in allowing the bear to continue to contribute to their experience of wildness in the mountain West.

Though some of the accounts he shares in the book are horrific, they are no more so than you would find in any fatal automobile accident file. What we begin to see, however, when we look objectively at the evidence Herrero provides, is important. We begin to see that there are certain situations in which we place bears, where instinct can overpower learning and natural caution and the bear may charge and even attack. Herrero offers that the more we know about these situations the more we can avoid them. Herrero further offers that by knowing and understanding patterns of bear aggression we can anticipate the safest possible action in an encounter with a bear and increase our chances of avoiding injury or death.

Herrero's scientific examination of the causes of bear attacks and recommendations on how to avoid them are not foolproof. Herrero himself is circumspect about his capacity to help others reduce the chances of injurious encounters with bears:

*Regard me as a scientific handicapper. I study a bear's history – actually a lot of bears – and suggest where you should place your bets. I think I'm a good handicapper because I've been able to look at the track record of many grizzly bears throughout North America. And I am painfully aware that if I give the wrong advice, someone may suffer injury or death.<sup>29</sup>*

Although avoidance of injury from bear attacks cannot be reduced to a simple formula, Herrero did lead us to a new concept. By combining the principles of safe travel in bear country with a growing contemporary understanding of the feeding, mating and rearing behaviour of bears and their distribution and movement patterns, we may be able to change our relationship with the bear. If we know the kinds of habitat bears favour at different times of the year, in an area in which we want

to travel we can begin to predict where bears might be and what they might be doing on a given day, in a given season, in a given habitat. This understanding combined with knowledge of what to do in the event of a confrontation provides a big step in minimizing conflicts that might be fatal to both people and bears. By applying what Herrero teaches us, about bears and about ourselves, we may be able to learn to share habitat more safely with bears and permit more peaceful coexistence between the two species.

The wonder of Herrero's book goes far beyond the suggestion of the vision of a culture capable of sharing habitat with predators like bears. The classic nature of this book resides in its overall prescience. Though the first edition was written two decades ago, it prefigured the manner in which people would look at bear safety in the future. It predisposed backcountry users to a higher awareness of bears and what could be done to avoid them. It predicted the widespread use of bear repellents like the universally popular bear spray that hikers carry with them in bear country today. It recommended bear-management strategies based on ecosystem integrity that are the norm in national parks today. In his cool, objective and highly scientific way, Herrero also dispelled the hysteria associated with the role the grizzly actually plays as an indicator of ecosystem health in the mountain West. In 1985, Herrero pointed out that there would be no ecosystem collapse if we killed all the bears in our national parks and surrounding areas. Herrero allotted the great bear, and its smaller cousin the black bear, their rightful place in the ecosystems of the West. Bears are important, not because our ecosystems would fail without them, but because they represent the fullest expression of the diversity and natural beauty that the West possessed when first Europeans first arrived on this continent.

Stephen Herrero's work went far beyond the publication of *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*. His research findings began to influence bear management inside and outside Canada's mountain national parks. Even today, hardly a grizzly project of note in Canada is undertaken without his input.

Because the findings of scientists like Stephen Herrero are so easy to understand, a great number of non-scientists involved with bears consider themselves expert. This, as Thomas McNamee points out, makes practicing bona fide science difficult for genuine experts. Sometimes it seems that there are as many self-acknowledged experts on bears as there are armchair experts on mountaineering. Real expertise on bears, however, does not come from reading about them. It comes

from experience in observing them. From the domain of first-hand experience have come some surprisingly credible observers who have become an expert on their own terms. An important divide was crossed in North America when enlightened hunters and hunting guides began to see the great bear in a new light. There are still conflicts but we are beginning to think differently about what they might mean to our relationship to the bear and its future in our West.

### EMBRACING THE BEAR

IN *BEAR ATTACKS*, HERRERO described an encounter involving Patricia Van Tighem and her husband Trevor Janz, which took place on the Crypt Lake Trail in Waterton Lakes National Park on a cold Sunday morning in September of 1983:

*They were returning from camping overnight and it was snowing lightly, but not enough to obscure their vision. Patricia remembers the wind blowing into their faces before they were attacked by a grizzly bear. Trevor was 100 to 130 feet ahead of Patricia and was singing softly when he suddenly saw the head of a bear below the trail about fifty feet to his left. He had no way of knowing that eighty feet away there was a partly consumed bighorn sheep carcass on which the bear, a female grizzly, and her two yearling cubs had been feeding.<sup>30</sup>*

The grizzly mauled both Trevor and Patricia terribly. When the horrifying encounter was over, Patricia had lost an eye and much of her face.<sup>31</sup> Seventeen years later, after scores of operations, untold pain and personal trial, Patricia Van Tighem wrote *The Bear's Embrace: A True Story of Surviving A Grizzly Bear Attack*, a book about her survival and painful but still incomplete recovery. It is not a book for the faint of heart, for it tells of mental anguish, suffering and unendurable physical pain. It is an important book, however, because it starts when the bear mauling ends. It tells what happens after you have been attacked by a bear. Throughout the painful descriptions of her injuries, the difficulties in getting the kind of care she needed, the failed surgeries and the months in hospitals and institutions, you feel Van Tighem gradually rising above her injuries and disfigurement to reach for a larger meaning for what has happened to her. Here the book becomes much more than just an engaging account. It goes places that even the author may not have fully foreseen. In the end, Van Tighem does something that we all must do if we are to grant the natural world the right to exist and the capacity to sustain us: we must accept that we are part of nature

and allow ourselves to be embraced by it. In other words, we must accept the bear's embrace.

### **THE DIVIDE UNCROSSED: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE GREAT BEAR**

DECIDING TO EMBRACE the bear is one thing, actually doing so is quite another. There are a great number of attitudes and habits that we have to continue to work to change if we are going to successfully learn to safely share habitat with bears over the long term. Some of the things we have to change are deeply rooted in the collective human psyche. Others are just habits that have to be reconsidered if we want to realize our healthy ecosystems as highly desired and precious tourism resources in the future.

One divide we will likely never cross is the innate fear many people have of bears. The origins of this fear lie deep within the collective unconscious of our culture. It is to this primal fear that the media appeals with bold headlines about bear attacks. Sensational bear stories have always served to feed supposition at the expense of fact. Suppositions, as we have indicated elsewhere, often have a long life. As William Kittredge once noted, the public has a taste for second-hand dangers. Getting past the image of the bear as a terrifying and incomprehensible force of wild nature is one of our greatest long-term challenges.

### **SCIENCE, SCIENTIFIC AGREEMENT AND BIOPOLITICS**

IF ONE CONSIDERS THE GOALS and method of science, one can see that differences of opinion between scientists over how bear populations should be managed are a given. If you accept the obvious importance of remaining bear habitat in the West to a growing and resource-hungry population, you can also see that it is impossible to keep bear research from being politicized. It must be stated, however, that is not the purpose or function of pure science to act upon its research findings. That is the job of politicians and decision-makers within the organizations charged with managing our Mountain Parks. The structure that exists today in North America is that research is conducted, findings validated, and results presented to those responsible for making collaborative decisions about land use. As much as we would like science to tell us everything we should do to manage landscapes wisely, it cannot. Good science, it seems, often ends up asking more questions than it answers.

One divide we have yet to cross is the one that reconciles humans as part of natural environmental processes. To what extent can we interfere with an ecosystem and still have it remain “natural”? How natural is natural? And where does the bear fit into this scheme? Circumstances do not always allow us to gather all the facts we need in time to make sound decisions. Sometimes we have to make educated guesses. It is at this juncture that we leave the world of science and enter the troubled dominion of biopolitics.

Like all worlds unto themselves, biopolitics is a diverse domain. It includes the public relations imagery that shapes our notions of what is a desirable way of life in the West. Within this domain are public relations strategies that make us think we still live in a wild and untrammelled West. Even though the original Canadian Pacific Railway ambition of settling Western Canada was fulfilled in the twentieth century, developers and community planners conspire to give us a sense that we are still living in the Wild West. We name subdivisions after the animals and plants they replaced and still give ourselves airs when in the company of visitors, pretending we still live on the edge of a frontier. We have not figured out that the West *would* be a paradise if humans spread themselves among the remaining wildlife species instead of completely replacing them.

The world of biopolitics also extends to the complex domain of land-use jurisdiction. When we examine what each of the jurisdictions in the Mountain Parks have in common, we realize a number of divides that can be crossed through co-operation. We have already realized that national parks, as generous as they often are in area, do not always preserve the quantities of the right kind of habitat to ensure the survival of key indicator species such as bears. Our research has also allowed us to realize that the ranges of bears often extend far beyond national and provincial parks into other jurisdictions where other forms of land use are encouraged. We know from Kananaskis Country and projects like the Foothills Model Forest that animals like bears can survive in multiple land use areas if they carefully managed.

There is still much to be hopeful about. More than at any other time in modern history, there is willingness to work together to find ways to preserve enough of the right kind of habitat and enough corridors to that habitat to assure the survival of the great bear over time. The cultivation of the common willingness to work together toward the future of the bear and its place in Western culture is what the Mountain Parks are all about. There is also evidence that what we are doing is working. In

the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, healthy populations of wild grizzlies can be found within an hour's drive of a city of a million people. In this the people who live in and around the Mountain Parks should take great pride, for it suggests that if we can learn to share habitat safely and successfully with the great bear, it is still possible to create the West we want.