

## WILL “WELFARE BEARS” BE FORCED INTO A LIFE OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE?



Feeding Time (Photo Credit: “The Bear Dude”)

### A COMMUNITY’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF B.C.’S GROW-OP BEARS

#### HEADLINES

AUGUST 17, 2010 » Bears guarded B.C. grow-op: Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Source: CBC)

AUGUST 18, 2010 » EXCLUSIVE: Interview with officers who raided bear-protected grow op (Source: Castlegar Source)

AUGUST 23, 2010 » B.C. grow-op bear petition signatures triple (Source: CBC)

AUGUST 24, 2010 » Actor Jason Priestley backs campaign to save bears (Source: National Post)

AUGUST 31, 2010 » Bears will not be shot: Minister of Environment and the Bear Dude talks (Source: Castlegar Source)

AUGUST 31, 2010 » B.C. pot bears can keep feeding until hibernation (Source: CBC)

SEPTEMBER 6, 2010 » B.C. man denies taming bears to guard grow-op (Source: CTV)

MARCH 23, 2011 » Bear Dude pleads guilty to feeding wildlife (Source: Grand Forks Gazette)

MAY 24, 2011 » B.C. pot bears wake up with the munchies (Source: CBC)

MAY 6, 2011 » Possible death sentence looms for grow-op bears (Source: CTV)

JUNE 17, 2011 » 2 bears killed after being trained to eat dog food at grow-op (Source: CTV)

AUGUST 4, 2011 » Bear death tally rises at Christina Lake (Source: Castlegar Source)

#### INTRODUCTION

August 2010 – “B.C. Grow-Op Bears” hit international media following police investigation of a rural property near Christina Lake, a seasonal tourist town with less than 1,000 permanent residents in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. Investigators discovered a marijuana grow operation and dozens of black bears, seemingly unfazed and rather curious about the presence of police. A website and videos on “The Bear Dude” quickly emerged. The author discussed feeding the bears for years but it was unrelated to any other alleged activities on the property.

Public concern for the bears’ fate was high given B.C.’s ‘problem bear’ policy. In 2008, 584 black bears were killed and 384 were killed in 2009 due to human-wildlife conflicts. The B.C. Ministry of Environment decided, in this case, to allow the fed bears to stay until hibernation, but all feeding would cease in 2011. There were many reports on the opinions of the public in this case but little was known about the attitudes of local residents. A survey was initiated to understand local opinions on the bears, to provide a human-dimensions snap-shot of a contentious wildlife issue before and after management intervention.

#### METHODS

- ✓ Two-phase random digit dialing telephone survey of Christina Lake residents (February & November 2011) to capture attitudes before and after summer management activities.
- ✓ February – 1478 calls made to 610 households (up to five call attempts). Of 270 eligible and known working numbers, 159 calls completed, 120 declined.
- ✓ Survey of basic facts (gender, length of residency); behaviour (hunter/non-hunter); beliefs (frequency bear observations); opinions on bears (general, safety concerns); and attitudes towards management options (fall/spring, penalties).
- ✓ Mix of quantitative (likert scale) and qualitative (open-ended) questions.



#### PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- Most respondents were long-time residents that held positive or neutral attitudes towards bears in area, with “live and let live” approach as they felt it was normal to live close to bears in a rural area.
- Majority of respondents were not concerned or only slightly concerned about the safety of themselves (69%), their children (59%), their pets (72%), or their farm animals (80%), due to the food-conditioned bears.
- 62% of respondents were supportive and 15% were neutral towards the fall management plan to feed and let the bears hibernate.
- Supporters said it was the “fairest” and “most viable” option given time of year, it “would have been cruel not to feed” and it “saved the neighbours grief”.
- 79% of respondents were unsupportive of placing the bears in captivity, while 77% were unsupportive of humane killing, because “it was not the bears’ fault” and “there has got to be a better option”. Opinions were split on proposals to relocate.

**Bears in Christina Lake?**  
We want to know what you think!

A random sample of Christina Lake residents will be phoned between January 28th and February 28th and asked to participate in an anonymous telephone survey for a UBC graduate research project.

If selected, we will ask one adult per household to answer a 10-minute questionnaire so we can learn more about the bears in your area. For more information on this study contact researcher Sara Dubois at [sara.dubois@ubc.ca](mailto:sara.dubois@ubc.ca)

#### SUMMARY

Overall, the community was very tolerant of living with the food-conditioned bears, but agreed their future was uncertain. Many believed the individuals feeding were misguided but “kind and good-hearted” and almost all respondents said feeding the bears was very wrong.

As one respondent (female, hunting household, >20 year resident) stated, these bears are now being “forced into a life of crime” because they have been “living off welfare” for so long.

#### NEXT STEPS

Phase 2: phone survey to the 159 Christina Lake residents in Phase 1 will begin in late November 2011.

