

# WildSafeBC Elk Valley and South Country Annual Report 2016

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Including: Elkford, Sparwood and the surrounding rural Elk Valley and South Country

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the activities of the Elk Valley and South Country WildSafeBC Program between May 1st and October 30th 2016. It includes the highlights and challenges of delivering the program to residents and visitors in Elkford, Sparwood, rural areas in the Elk Valley, Elko, Jaffray, Baynes Lake, Grasmere, and the surrounding South Country. It also includes recommendations for the future of the program and acknowledges the volunteers and community partners which are crucial for success.

A great berry crop, community initiatives, increased awareness and a high bear mortality rate in 2015 where more than fifteen food-conditioned and habituated bears had to be destroyed have all contributed to an overall reduction in human wildlife conflict in the Elk Valley and South Country in 2016.

Although the total number of Problem Wildlife Occurrence Reports (PWOR's) has decreased, the proportion of grizzly bear calls has increased. 40 out of 87 or 46% of PWOR's for bears were grizzly bear reports. There have been five human-caused, grizzly bear deaths (excluding hunting related harvests). These deaths were caused by car and train collisions, control kills due to human/bear conflict, and illegal kills. A bear and two cubs were destroyed in Sparwood. Traps had to be set by the Conservation Officers in Elkford for habituated, food-conditioned black bears but they were never caught.

A new University of Alberta study by PhD candidate Clayton Lamb proposes that the Elk Valley has effectively become an ecological trap, where human development in close proximity to attractive berry crops results in a lower survival rate for grizzly bears. According to Lamb "Non-hunting deaths — like those caused by road, rail and human-bear interactions — are harder to regulate and will require much more education and behavioural adjustments."

Thanks to ongoing support and valuable community partnerships the WildSafeBC Program was very well received. The demand for our presence at community events, presentations to groups of interest and involvement with community initiatives continues to increase and is indicative of the program's success.

Recruiting suitable volunteers, educating long-time residents and new comers about the storage of garbage indoors between collection days and funding for the WildSafeBC Program have been ongoing challenges and there are significant mileage costs and hours needed to cover such a large area.

## **HIGHLIGHTS AND SUCCESSES OF THE ELK VALLEY AND SOUTH COUNTRY WILDSAFEBC PROGRAM**

The WildSafeBC Program has been very well supported, received, and is in demand from Elk Valley and South Country residents and visitors. Over the years the program has formed many valuable partnerships with various community organizations. Our presence at community events, educational programs, support from local media, social networking and consulting with District staff and Council have all resulted in increased awareness, a decrease in PWOR's and human/wildlife conflict. The highlights of the Elk Valley and South Country WildSafeBC Program are as follows:

### **Public Displays at Community Events**

The WildSafeBC public information display was set up at a variety of community events throughout the Elk Valley and South Country. The informative stand-up display, brochures, props (bear pelt, skull, claws, cougar pelt and skull, sample scat, and rubber footprints) and banner attracted a lot of attention. The display was attended by the Community Coordinator with the assistance of volunteers on occasion. These events were an ideal opportunity for people to approach us in a relaxed and social environment and discuss local wildlife issues. Many great contacts were made with the public and other exhibitors. WildSafeBC spent six days at the following community events: Sparwood Coal Miner Days, Elkford Wild Cat Days, Baynes Lake Farmers Market and Sparwood Farmers Market.



Figure 1 THE WILDSAFEBC DISPLAY AT THE SPARWOOD FARMERS MARKET

### **Presentations to Groups of Interest**

The demand for WildSafeBC presentations to groups of interest continues to grow. Presentations including wildlife biology and safety with Bears, Cougars, Coyotes, Deer, the viewing of “Staying Safe in Bear Country” and how to safely use bear spray were requested by many organizations. The WildSafeBC program was delivered to front line resort staff at Island Lake Lodge and Fernie Alpine Resort.

## Children's Educational Program

Children are the greatest advocates of our program and can always be counted on to deliver the message to their parents. The WildSafeBC Junior Ranger Program was delivered to more than 800 students throughout the Elk Valley and South Country. Presentations included wildlife biology and safety with bears, cougars, coyotes, deer, role plays and a craft for younger children. A follow-up homework exercise (Junior Ranger Coloring Book) was given to all teachers for kids to take home and then was to be reviewed by teachers. This was a great way to ensure the message got to a broad range of families throughout the community. WildSafeBC presentations were held at the following schools

- Frank J Mitchell Elementary and Tree Top Daycare in Sparwood
- Rocky Mountain Elementary and preschool in Elkford
- Jaffray Elementary School



Figure 2 CHILDREN LEARNING TO RESPOND TO WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS

## **Elkford continues to bear-proof the community**

Since 2012 Elkford has acquired more than 40 bear-resistant residential containers available to loan to residents who have no garages or sheds to secure garbage in areas with bear activity. All the commercial dumpsters have also been retrofitted with metal latches to make them bear resistant. The end result is very positive; less garbage is easily available to wildlife. A combination of education, bylaw enforcement, availability of residential bear resistant containers and retrofitted communal dumpsters has proven effective in reducing human-wildlife conflict in Elkford.



**Figure 3 DISTRICT OF ELKFORD DUMPSTER RETRO FITTED WITH METAL LATCHES**

## **Sparwood takes initiatives to prevent human-wildlife conflict**

There is a long history of human-wildlife conflict in Sparwood. Commercial dumpsters provided by the district at the Causeway Bay Hotel, Mountain Shadows Campground, the Convenience store in Sparwood Heights and many other locations are easily accessible to bears. Garbage is also routinely stored outdoors accessible to bears between collection days.

The District of Sparwood has made great efforts in a short period to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Some of the commercial dumpsters have been retrofitted to prevent access to wildlife and the district is looking at a pilot project to provide a number of businesses with a history of human bear conflict with bear resistant dumpsters. The Causeway Bay hotel has taken initiative and is footing the bill for bear resistant dumpsters rented from a contractor.

The community compost site is monitored and cleaned up regularly, the wildlife attractant bylaw was amended and the bylaw officer has been issuing warnings to residents attracting wildlife. The district has been actively promoting the importance of securing attractants. This had been accomplished by placing the message in newspaper ads, community newsletters and on their website. The district has also been looking at a fruit tree replacement program. The WildSafeBC program was delivered to all students at FJ Mitchell elementary and the WildSafeBC display was presented by the Community Coordinator and volunteers at various community events.

## **The Use of Social Networking to Deliver our Program**

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Facebook page and WildSafeBC Elk Valley Blog has allowed residents and visitors throughout the Elk Valley and South Country to access information about wildlife sightings and give us the opportunity to reach a wider audience with our educational messages. All wildlife sightings and incidents reported to the 24-hour Conservation Officer Hotline (RAPP) was posted on our blog and Facebook pages. We now have close to 800 followers on our Facebook pages and some posts reached up to 4,500 people in a day! The use of social media to deliver our message to a wide range of people in a cost effective and timely manner has been very successful.

## **Support from Local Media**

WildSafeBC has a weekly column in The Free Press and the Elk Valley Herald where readers are updated on recent wildlife activity, educational events and include educational messages of the Coordinator's choosing. WildSafeBC also provides the local radio stations The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 with a summary of wildlife activity every week. This support is crucial in keeping both residents and visitors informed.

## **CHALLENGES TO DELIVERING THE WILDSAFEBBC PROGRAM**

Funding for the Elk Valley and South Country Program has been an ongoing challenge as there are significant mileage costs and hours needed to cover such a large area. It is also important to keep the program running and consistent to develop community partnerships and maintain traction. Community events, school presentations, local media, and social networking were the best way to deliver the program. Garbage kept outdoors between collection days and accessible to wildlife is the root cause of human-wildlife conflict in the Elk Valley and South Country.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2017 WILDSAFEBC PROGRAM**

As the Elk Valley continues to grow and develop so will the need to continue educational efforts. There will always be new people, new bears, and other wildlife. Keeping WildSafeBC and its message of “keeping wildlife wild and communities’ safe” should continue to be a focus as should our ability to provide concrete solutions to reducing human-wildlife conflict.

Thanks to ongoing support, valuable community partnerships and new initiatives, the WildSafeBC Program is very well received and the demand for our presence at community events and presentations to groups of interest continues to increase. The WildSafeBC Program has proven effective in reducing human-wildlife conflict and has resulted in cleaner and safer communities for people and wildlife. Preventing human-wildlife conflict should continue to be at the forefront of people’s minds with conversations in neighborhoods, local cafes, on social media and at City Hall.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

WildSafeBC Elk Valley is grateful for the generous support the program receives from sponsors, partners, and volunteers. Thanks to our sponsors: Ministry of Environment, Columbia Basin Trust, British Columbia Conservation Foundation, District of Elkford, District of Sparwood and the RDEK. Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Frank DeBoon, Joe Garay and Ryan Gordon, District of Elkford and Sparwood Staff and Council, R.D.E.K., East Kootenay Park Service, Baynes Lake Lions Club, Free Press, Elk Valley Herald, The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 radio stations. Finally, thank you to all the residents who made an effort this season to remove wildlife attractants from their properties. Let’s keep wildlife wild and our community safe!