

WildSafeBC Fernie Annual Report 2016

Including West Fernie, Island lake Lodge, Fernie Alpine Resort and Mt Fernie Provincial Park



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Ministry of
Environment



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the activities for the Fernie WildSafeBC Program between May 1st and October 30th 2016, including the highlights and challenges of delivering the program to residents and visitors in the City of Fernie and surrounding area. It also includes recommendations for the future of the WildSafeBC 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 when twenty-two food conditioned and habituated bears had to be destroyed have all contributed to an overall reduction in human-wildlife conflict in Fernie in 2016. There was a significant reduction in Problem Wildlife Occurrence Reports (PWOR'S), over 90 in 2015 versus 30 in 2016. To date this year two black bears had to be destroyed due to human-wildlife conflict. There were also many moose, cougar and coyote sightings on trails and in parks. Development, tourism, and trail use in Fernie (a mecca for hiking and mountain biking) continues to increase as does the potential for human-wildlife conflict, highlighting the need for the WildSafeBC program.

Thanks to ongoing support, community initiatives, and valuable partnerships, the WildSafeBC Program continues to be very well received and the demand for our presence at community events and presentations to groups of interest continues to increase. This is the greatest indication of the program's success. Recruiting suitable and reliable volunteers and educating a mix of new, seasonal, long-time residents and visitors about the storage of garbage indoors between collection days and fruit tree maintenance continue to be the main challenges for the program.



Figure 1 FERNIE IS A MECCA FOR HIKING AND MOUNTAIN BIKING IN PRIME WILDLIFE HABITAT.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUCCESSES OF THE FERNIE WILDSAFEBC PROGRAM

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

Public Displays at Community Events



Figure 2 THE WILDSAFEBC DISPLAY AT THE CHILDRENS FESTIVAL.

The WildSafeBC public information display was set up at a variety of community events and continues to be a very effective way to deliver the program. 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 mainly 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 7 days at the following community events: Fernie Farmers Markets, Canada Day Event, Fernie Fall Festival, Fernie Trails Alliance Festival, Children's Festival and Family Safety Day Awareness Event.

Presentations to Groups of Interest

The demand for WildSafeBC presentations to groups of interest continues to grow. Understanding the basics of wildlife biology and behaviour helps prevent human-wildlife conflict. Presentations included topics such as: wildlife biology and safety (with Bears, Cougars, Coyotes, and Deer), “Staying Safe in Bear Country” and hands-on safe use of bear spray (using inert spray). These presentations were delivered to Front line Resort staff at Island Lake Lodge and Fernie Alpine Resort, Adult Life Skills Groups, College of the Rockies Students, CBAL new residents group, Fernie Trail Festival, Fernie Women on Wheels group, Fernie flyers kids mountain bike group, Public events at the Bike Park and the Fernie Fall Festival.



Figure 3 FERNIE FLYERS LEARNING HOW TO PREVENT ENCOUNTERS WITH WILDLIFE AND SAFELY USE BEAR SPRAY.

Children’s Educational Program

Children are the greatest advocates of our program and can always be counted on to deliver the message to adults. The WildSafeBC Junior Ranger Program was delivered to more than 500 elementary students of Isabella Dicken Elementary and the Fernie Academy as well as French Immersion classes at Ecole Sophie-Morigeau, Fernie Secondary, Outdoor Connections and the Creative Minds Pre-school. Presentations covered wildlife biology and safety (with bears, cougars, coyotes, and deer); incorporating role plays and crafts for younger children. A follow up homework exercise (Junior Ranger colouring book and WildSafeBC questionnaire) was given to all teachers for kids to take home, complete and then be reviewed by teachers. This was a great way to ensure the message got to a broad range of families throughout the community.



Figure 4 STUDENTS LEARNING TO RESPOND TO BEAR ENCOUNTERS AT IDES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.

WSBC has also been working with the Grade 8 French Immersion Community Health class. Students have conducted a bear hazard assessment of their neighborhood, are working on a short film PSA focusing on keeping wildlife wild and communities safe in English with French subtitles and a community bear resistant dumpster painting project featuring keeping wildlife wild. This has been a great way to engage our youth and future community leaders.



Figure 5 EXAMPLE OF THE FERNIE ART STATION COMMUNITY DUMPSTER PAINTING PROJECT

The Use of Social Networking to Deliver our Program

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Facebook and WildSafeBC Elk Valley Blog has allowed residents and visitors throughout the Elk Valley to access information about wildlife sightings, giving 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) were posted on our blog and Facebook pages. Followers of the linked Facebook pages and Twitter feed received automatic alerts whenever sightings are reported.

We now have close to 800 followers on our Facebook pages and some posts reached up to 4,500 people in a day! Our WildSafeBC Elk Valley blog has an RSS feed with Fernie.com and links to other popular sites such as the Fernie Mountain Bike club, Fernie Trails Alliance, Fernie Fix Magazine, Free Press, Fernie Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Fernie and many others. 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 created by the Coordinator. 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.

NEW INITIATIVES

Volunteer Fruit Harvesting Program

Garbage accessible to wildlife and unmanaged fruit trees are the root causes of human-wildlife conflict in Fernie. WildSafeBC and a group of concerned residents spearheaded by Rachel Dortman and Elk Valley Homesteading worked together to form a fruit tree management initiative. They updated the fruit tree map from the 2009 Bear Hazard Assessment and delivered fruit tree management tips and information about assistance with harvesting and disposing of fruit to just over 300 properties known to have fruit trees in Fernie.

14 property owners registered for assistance with fruit picking on 3 select days in September. A total of 20 volunteers picked 23 fruit trees, including 18 apple trees. Four truckloads of fruit were harvested of which 2.5 loads were donated to a pig farmer, 1 load was delivered to the transfer station in Fernie and the rest was taken by volunteers. Many dialogues were initiated between volunteers, neighbours and other community members. The project was also well promoted in our local paper and on social media. The result was a huge step in the right direction and created a noticeable positive difference in the overall management of apple trees in Fernie. Thank you to Rachel Dortman and the crew of volunteers who made this initiative a great success.

Wildsight's apple capture program also has a tree and tool sharing program with fruit picking, tree pruning equipment and apple presses available to lend. Several residents have brought forward concerns regarding the ornamental crab apple trees on 2nd avenue which will be brought up at the next Council meeting. This is another ideal opportunity for the City of Fernie to be seen leading by example and replacing the crab apple trees with non-fruit bearing trees.



Figure 6 FRUIT TREE PICKING VOLUNTEERS AND THEIR HARVEST.

Communal Bear Resistant Bins

The Coordinator was asked by Council to prepare a plan to implement cost effective, achievable changes to ensure that less garbage is available to wildlife. In June 2016 Council made a resolution to implement the recommendation of upgrading all City of Fernie facility dumpsters to bear resistant dumpsters. In July an additional 5 bear resistant dumpsters were available for public use on city property at five locations including, City Hall, Aquatic Centre, Arena, Max Turyk and the Fernie Mobile Home Park.

Providing residents with a convenient option to dispose of garbage at any time on any day has been very well received and is a great solution for: people who are leaving town and miss garbage day, shift workers, second home owners, and visitors. This has resulted in less garbage available to wildlife between collection days. The bins designated for public use are easily identified with a “Keep Wildlife Wild” decal highlighting conditions of use. The initiative was promoted on the City of Fernie website, local papers, radio advertisement and social media. The results include: less garbage in the community is accessible to wildlife, a reduction in human-wildlife conflict, a safer community and fewer bears are having to be destroyed.



Figure 7 COMMUNAL BEAR RESISTANT DUMPSTER WITH THE ‘KEEP WILDLIFE WILD’ DECAL.

Summer Student Bylaw Enforcement

Residents have requested that the City of Fernie fine residents leaving garbage accessible to wildlife as per Consolidated Waste & Regulation Bylaw #1845 and that bear resistant dumpsters be mandatory for all businesses. The city leading by example with bear resistant dumpsters has motivated many businesses to upgrade to bear resistant dumpsters. Two Criminal Justice students were employed to work with Bylaw Services during the summer. WildSafeBC and the student bylaw officers spent two afternoons doing an “education first” campaign addressing wildlife attractants with businesses and residents. A number of verbal and written warnings were issued and followed up on by Bylaw Services with the warnings resulting in compliance.

CHALLENGES TO DELIVERING THE WILDSAFEBC PROGRAM

Fortunately the WildSafeBC program continues to be well supported and funded and the challenges faced are minimal, however, the storage of garbage outside homes between collection days and fruit tree maintenance continues to be an issue.

The main challenge remains the recruitment of suitable volunteers. A small but very effective crew of volunteers assist with key tasks, including assisting with public events and supporting our blog. Finding people who can help on short notice with door-to-door visits and garbage tagging when bears are in the area continues to be a challenge. Fortunately, WildSafeBC Fernie has an excellent rapport with the Conservation Officer Service (COS). The COS and the Community Coordinator have worked together on several occasions to visit problem areas, which proved very effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2017 WILDSAFEBC PROGRAM

As Fernie 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. We need to continue to provide concrete and innovative solutions to preventing human-wildlife conflict.

Thanks to ongoing support, valuable community partnerships and new initiatives, the Fernie WildSafeBC Program is very well received and the demand for our presence at community events and presentations to groups of interest continues to increase. 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

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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!