

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2017

Elk Valley and South Country

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

Prepared by Kathy Murray, WildSafeBC Community Coordinator



Ministry of Environment

Executive Summary

This report describes the activities of the Elk Valley and South Country WildSafeBC Program between May 1st and October 15th 2017. 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 cold spring pushed bears into valley bottoms to look for emerging greenery. We had several reports of grizzly bears and a few of black bears in communities between May and late September this year. The Elk Valley and South Country is very rich grizzly bear habitat in close proximity to human developments. More people and highway traffic, a noticeable increase in trail use, more visitors, unsecured garbage, unmanaged fruit trees and new developments have all contributed to human-wildlife conflict.

To date this year two grizzlies were destroyed in defence of property, one grizzly, four black bears and two cougars were destroyed by the Conservation Officer Service. Overall the number of Problem Wildlife Occurrence Reports (PWOR'S) was low in residential areas and this can be attributed to a good berry crop and increased awareness regarding the management of wildlife attractants. However, there was an increase in PWOR's involving incidents between people and wildlife in recreational areas. A mountain biker was bluff charged by a grizzly and cubs four times, a number of hikers reporting being bluff charged by grizzlies and cubs on popular trails, a hunter was attacked by a grizzly and a cougar was sighted several times on a popular trail and eventually had to be destroyed.

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, management of fruit trees, and funding for the WildSafeBC Program have been ongoing challenges as there are significant mileage costs and hours needed to cover such a large area.

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Highlights of the 2017 Season

The WildSafeBC Program has been very well supported, received, and 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. 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. All of 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 Emergency Awareness Event, Elkford Fall Registration Night, Elkford Riverview Market, 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 video and how to safely use bear spray was requested

by many organizations. The WildSafeBC program was delivered to front line resort staff at Island Lake Lodge, Fernie Alpine Resort, Finning and Scouts and Guides groups in Elkford.

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 500 students throughout the Elk Valley and South Country. The program is delivered to Kindergarten, Grade 2 and grade 5 students every year and daycare, after school care and summer camps.

Presentations include 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. It's always impressive when a five year old knows what to do if you see a bear or where to keep garbage stored between collection days. WildSafeBC presentations were held at the following schools.

- Frank J Mitchell Elementary and Sparwood Secondary in Sparwood
- Rocky Mountain Elementary and Elkford Secondary in Elkford
- Jaffray Elementary School



Figure 2: Children learning to respond to wildlife encounters

RDEK Bear Smart Planning

On August 30th WildSafeBC presented to the Regional District of East Kootenay (RDEK) Board in Cranbrook. I am pleased to report that strategies to reduce the availability of garbage and other attractants such as fruit trees, livestock and bird feeders, in order to mitigate human-

wildlife conflict, will be considered as part of the solid waste management plan review and future planning processes throughout the RDEK.

As development, tourism, and trail use continue to increase in the RDEK so does the potential for human-wildlife conflict and highlights the importance of:

- Keeping garbage inaccessible to wildlife,
- Continuing educational efforts,
- Promoting responsible trail use, and
- enforcing bylaws.

WildSafeBC Coordinators look forward to the opportunity to work with new developments throughout the RDEK and continue working towards keeping people safe and wildlife wild.

Elkford Bear-Proof Efforts

Since 2012 Elkford has acquired more than 50 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 Human-Wildlife Conflict Reduction

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 were easily accessible to bears.

The District of Sparwood has made great efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Residential curbside garbage must now be placed in garbage cans with tight fitting lids to prevent access from wildlife and eliminate wind strewn garbage. Wildlife attractant bylaws are being enforced. Clean up orders addressing unsecured garbage and unmanaged fruit trees have been issued and there has been a noticeable increase in compliance. The Causeway Bay Hotel and the Mountain Shadows Campground have opted to provide their own bear resistant dumpsters. We have had no reports of bears accessing garbage in these areas this year. The district has been actively promoting the importance of securing attractants in newspaper ads, community newsletters and on their website.

Bear in Area Signs

The WildSafeBC Fernie “Bear in Area” signs were initially a trial project in 2015 that proved very successful. The signs were placed in areas with current bear activity and served as a reminder for people to give bears space (when seen) and remember to keep household attractants for wildlife secure. The signs were left for one week at a time and removed if bears had moved on or moved to an adjacent strategic location so that people didn’t become desensitized to the message. This initiative is also a great opportunity to engage the neighborhood, start discussions and create awareness for all people passing by (including long-time residents, new seasonal residents and visitors.)



Figure 4: Bear in Area signs

Social Media

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and WildSafeBC Facebook page have 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. To date we've had 29,741 views on our local website and 108 posts, 460 followers and 151,500 reaches on our WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page. Our online presence combined with the use of social media to deliver our message to a wide range of people in a cost effective and timely manner continues to be very successful.

Support from Local Media

WildSafeBC has a weekly column in The Free Press where readers are updated on recent wildlife activity. WildSafeBC also provides the local radio stations The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 with a summary of wildlife activity every week. WildSafeBC has also been featured on CBC Daybreak and CTV evening news. Wildlife updates are also posted on the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and shared on the WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page. This support is crucial in keeping both residents and visitors informed.

Challenges of the 2017 Season

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 in order 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.

Goals for the 2018 Season

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, Patricia Burley and Ryan Gordon, District of Elkford and Sparwood Staff and Council, Savage Marketing, Baynes Lake Lions Club, Free Press, Elk Valley Herald, The Drive 99.1 and Summit 107 radio stations. Finally, thank you to everyone who made an effort this season to remove wildlife attractants from their properties and prevent human-wildlife conflict when out in recreational areas. Let's keep wildlife wild and our community safe!