

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2017

Fernie

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

Prepared by Kathy Murray, WildSafeBC Community Coordinator



Executive Summary

This report describes the activities for the Fernie WildSafeBC Program between May 1st and October 15th 2017, 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 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 Fernie between May and mid-October this year. Fernie 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 one grizzly was destroyed in defence of property and two cougars were destroyed by the Conservation Officers. 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, a hunter was attacked by a grizzly and a cougar was sighted a number of times on a popular trail and eventually had to be destroyed.

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.

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Highlights from the 2017 Season

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

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. 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 seven days at the following community events: Fernie Farmers Markets, Canada Day Event, Fernie Fall Fair, Children's Festival and Family Safety Day Awareness Event.



Figure 1: The WildSafeBC display at the Fernie Fall Fair

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, Fernie Information Centre, Fernie Alpine Resort, Adult Life Skills Groups, College of the Rockies Students, CBAL (new residents group), Fernie Women on Wheels group, Fernie flyers kids mountain bike group and public events at the Bike Park and the Fernie Fall Festival.



Figure 2: Fernie Alpine Resort staff 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 400 elementary students in Kindergarten, Grade 2 and Grade 5 at 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 coloring 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 3: Students learning to respond to bear encounters at Ides Elementary School

WildSafeBC 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 people passing by, long-time residents, new seasonal residents and visitors.



Figure 4: Bear in Area signs

The Use of Social Networking to Deliver our Program

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and WildSafeBC Facebook page have allowed residents and visitors throughout Fernie and surrounding areas 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.

Communal Bear Resistant Bins

The Community 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 coordinator's recommendation of upgrading all City of Fernie facility dumpsters to bear resistant dumpsters. In July an additional five 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 24/7 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 and 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 positive end result is less garbage accessible to wildlife, a reduction in both human-wildlife conflict and the needless destruction of bears.



Figure 5: Communal bear-resistant dumpster with the “Keep Wildlife Wild” decal

New Developments

On August 30th WildSafeBC presented to the 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. I am also hopeful that the conversation started with Council at the Committee of the Whole meeting in August will continue and that communal bear resistant dumpsters will be considered as an option for the Montane Development in Fernie.

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.

Fernie is Wildlife Country Magnets

People come from around the world to recreate in Fernie and the surrounding area in high quality wildlife habitat. The noticeable increase in trail use has resulted in an increase in human-wildlife encounters. Educational efforts this year have been targeted at educating trail users about the importance of preventing wildlife encounters and being prepared to encounter wildlife anytime.

Thanks to the Fernie Brewing Company “Cheers to Charity” sufficient funds were raised to cover costs to have “Fernie is Wildlife Country” fridge magnets mail dropped to every residence in Fernie and given out at local events. The Fernie Brewing Company will be donating all profits of their flight of four beers to the Fernie WildSafeBC program between October 1st and December 15th. The magnet is a great reminder for people to manage attractants at home and

prevent wildlife encounters on the trail and is a great addition to signage at trail heads, posters in local sports stores and educational messages in the media.



Figure 6: Fernie is Wildlife Country magnet

Challenges for the 2017 Season

Fortunately the program has continued to be well supported and funded over the years and the challenges faced are minimal. The storage of garbage outside between collection days and fruit tree maintenance continue 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 are able to help out 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 a number of occasions to visit problem areas, which has proved to be very effective.

Goals for the 2018 Season

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 and provide concrete 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

WildSafeBC Fernie 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 and the City of Fernie. Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Frank DeBoon, Patricia Burley, Ryan Gordon, City of Fernie Staff and Council, Free Press, The Drive 99.1, Summit 107, Savage Marketing, Fernie Brewing company, Wildsight, Fernie Trails Alliance, Tourism Fernie, Fernie Alpine Resort, Island Lake Lodge and the Fernie Chamber of Commerce. Thank you to volunteers Emma VanTussonbroeck and Dan Savage.

Finally, thank you to all the residents who made an effort this season to remove wildlife attractants from their properties and preventing human-wildlife conflict in recreational areas. Let's keep wildlife wild and our community safe!