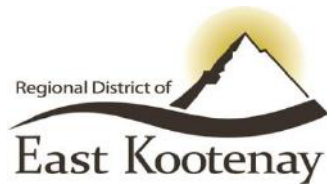


WildSafeBC Annual Report 2018

Elk Valley and South Country

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

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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 2018. It includes the highlights and challenges of delivering the program to residents and visitors in 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.

The South Country had a high level of grizzly bear activity between May and October. This can be attributed to a cold spring pushing bears into valley bottoms to look for emerging greenery followed by hot dry weather and smoke, the berry crop drying up later in August and grizzly bears being drawn into valley bottoms accessing fruit trees and livestock on their way to feed on the spawning Kokanee salmon. To date, one grizzly has been destroyed in Jaffray and other traps have been set due to reports of up to six grizzly bears in town at one time.

The number of Human Wildlife Conflict Reports (HWCT'S) in the Elk Valley was low in residential areas. To date one black bear was destroyed in Sparwood. This can be attributed to increased awareness regarding the management of wildlife attractants, less garbage accessible to wildlife with the new certified bear-resistant carts in Sparwood and a good berry crop. The number of incidents involving people and wildlife, particularly with grizzly bears and cougars, continues to increase. A child was attacked by a cougar while out on a family fishing trip and there were many reports of mountain bikers getting bluff charged by grizzly bears on Elk Valley trails. This can be attributed to an increase in trail and backcountry use.

Thanks to ongoing support and valuable community partnerships the WildSafeBC Program is well received, the demand continues to increase and is indicative of the program's success. The Junior Ranger program was delivered to over 400 school aged children, wildlife awareness and bear spray training to over 270 adults, over 325 contacts made at community events, 70 000 people reached through local media and 30 000 reached through social media. 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 2018 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 Human Wildlife Conflict Reports (HWCR) 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 WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WCC) 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 five days at the following community events: Sparwood Emergency Awareness Event, 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. There were many requests for wildlife awareness, particularly cougar and moose as well as bears and “how to safely use bear spray”. The WildSafeBC program was delivered to front line resort staff at Island Lake Lodge, Fernie Alpine Resort, staff and management at Finning, Teck, Brinkman

Forestry and Guides group in Baynes Lake. Coexisting with Grizzly Bear Workshops featuring grizzly bear education, safe use of bear spray, electric fencing and guest speaker Dr. Michael Proctor were held in Baynes Lake and Jaffray.



Figure 2: Wildlife Awareness and Bear Spray Training at Island Lake Lodge

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 (JRP) was delivered to more than 400 students throughout the Elk Valley and South Country. The program is delivered to Kindergarten, Grade 2 and grade 5 students every year to ensure that eventually every child has access to the age appropriate program. The program was also delivered to daycare, forest school, foreign exchange students, and summer camps.

Presentations include wildlife biology and safety with bears, cougars, coyotes, deer, role plays, the “Wild bear food game” and a craft for younger children. The JRP package was given to all students and was greatly appreciated by teachers. This was a great way to ensure the message got to a broad range of families throughout the community. WildSafeBC JRP presentations were held at Frank J. Mitchell elementary and High School in Sparwood, Jaffray Elementary and Outdoor Connections Forest School in Morrissey.



Figure 3: Grade 2 Students Playing the Wild Bear Food Game at Jaffray Elementary School

Sparwood Upgrades to Certified Bear Resistant Carts

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 residential garbage kept outdoors between collection days were easily accessible to bears.

The District of Sparwood has made great efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict. In late August, 1,700 certified bear resistant carts were delivered to all residents in Sparwood with the new automated garbage collection system starting in September. Council made a resolution last May to adopt the recommendations made in the Wildlife Management Strategy. 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 since the upgrades. The District has been actively promoting the importance of securing attractants in newspaper ads, community newsletters and social media and website.



Figure 4: Grade 5 Students learning about the proper use of Bear resistant Carts in Sparwood

Grizzly Bear Activity in South Country Communities

There was an unusually high level of grizzly bear activity in South Country communities, especially Jaffray. This can possibly be attributed to the smoke from local wildfires, the berry crop drying later in August, followed by the grizzly bears being drawn into valley bottoms accessing fruit trees and livestock on their way to feed on the spawning Kokanee salmon.

Fruit trees (apple, plum, pear and choke cherries) are in abundance throughout rural South Country communities. Long-time residents are comfortable with bears in their yard fattening up on fruit for the winter and have been for generations although the seasonal residents and summer campers are not so comfortable with grizzly bears around.

WildSafeBC organized a variety of events to educate a broad range of people including: WildSafeBC display at the Baynes Lake Farmers Market, two Coexisting with Grizzly Bear Presentations including grizzly bear education with Dr. Michael Proctor, electric fencing and how to use bear spray, door to door in problem areas adjacent to schools and public places with the Conservation Officers, Bear-in-area signs, presentations to Girl Guides and at the Jaffray Elementary School.

For the most part, residents we have spoken to have been receptive to the message and have made efforts to: clean up fruit trees, secure their attractants and many are considering electric fencing for their livestock. There is still a lot of work to do in a huge area made up of a mix of farming, smaller rural communities, campgrounds and an abundance of out-of-province summer visitors, primarily from Alberta.

Bear in Area Signs

The WildSafeBC “Bear in Area” signs were initially a trial project in Fernie 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. The signs are a very effective tool to get the message out to a broad range of people in a larger geographic area when it is not always possible to do door-to-door canvassing. On occasion the signs were installed by the Conservation Officers in out-of-town locations.



Figure 5: Bear in Area signs

Social Media

Our online presence with the WildSafeBC Elk Valley website supported by Savage Marketing and WildSafeBC Elk Valley 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 in 2018 we've had 16,531 views and 50 posts on the WildSafeBC ElkValley.com blog and 525 followers and 15,525 reaches on our WildSafeBC Elk Valley Facebook page.

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. Local media has enabled us to reach more than 60,000 people throughout the Elk Valley and South Country and is the most effective tool to deliver our message to a broad range of people in a large area.

Challenges of the 2018 Season

Funding for the Elk Valley and South Country Program and recruiting suitable volunteers have been an ongoing challenge as there are significant mileage costs and hours needed to cover such a large area. It is important to keep the program running and consistent in order to develop community partnerships and maintain traction.

We did not get financial support from the District of Elkford this year and therefore were unable to accommodate requests for presentations from teachers at Rocky Mountain Elementary School, Elkford Secondary and presence at community events such as the WildCat Days and the Riverview Market in Elkford.

There was an unusual high level of grizzly bear activity in South Country communities this year, especially in Jaffray. The lack of volunteers impacted the WCC's ability to perform door-to-door visits but was able to attend problem areas with the Conservation Officers. Community events,

school presentations, Bear in Area signs, local media and social networking were the best way to deliver the program to a broad range of people in a large geographic area.

Goals for the 2019 Season

As the Regional District of East Kootenay (RDEK) continues to grow and develop there will always be new people, new bears, and other wildlife interactions. Educational efforts highlighting the benefits of being a good neighbour by keeping garbage inaccessible to wildlife, cleaning up fruit trees and helping neighbours do the same is a great way to keep the program sustainable and will result in a cleaner and safer communities for wildlife and people.

WildSafeBC should continue to request support from the Districts of Elkford and Sparwood and RDEK areas A and B for 2019 as it is important to have all communities on board as wildlife will travel great distances and not recognize political boundaries. It was also recommended by Sergeant Denny Chretien from the Conservation Officer Service that we consider using the Aquatic Invasive Species Students to accompany WSBC on door-to-door educational campaigns to enable students to gain valuable field experience and communication skills. This would also resolve the challenge of relying on volunteers to accompany lone WSBC coordinators doing door-to-door or garbage tagging educational activities.

Acknowledgements

WildSafeBC 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 Sparwood and the RDEK. Our community partners have provided invaluable support and guidance. Thank you to: Conservation Officers Patricia Burley, Jeff Piwek and Ryan Gordon, District of Sparwood Staff and Council, the Regional District of East Kootenay, 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 for making an effort to be a good neighbour this season by removing wildlife attractants from their properties and preventing human-wildlife conflict when out in recreational areas. Let's keep wildlife wild and our community safe!