

Alaska Community Spotlight

Can Altering Human Behavior Eliminate Bear Problems?

By Ginna Purrington

Just eight miles outside of Haines, Alaska, the Chilkoot River winds for a single mile through spruce and hemlock forest before dumping fast-moving water into the estuary of Lutak Inlet. A strip of asphalt road follows the bank, allowing motorists to reach the campground at its source, glacial Chilkoot Lake. The river supports healthy runs of sockeye, coho, and pink salmon, as well as Dolly Varden trout. Brown bears, harbor seals, merganser ducks, bald eagles, and people appreciate the river's bounty, and all of them fish here together. Over the past five years, the popularity of the Chilkoot among human users has increased dramatically, resulting in conflicts between humans and bears.

Many user-groups and diverse landowners are associated with the contemporary Chilkoot River, which was for many hundreds of years the site of a Tlingit village. Today, a Culture Camp teaches traditional ways to youth on the banks of the river. Anglers from Haines have staked out favorite fishing spots. Residents of British Columbia and the Yukon bring convoys of RVs to fish throughout the warmer months. Residents of local Lutak subdivision walk dogs, fish, bike, and watch wildlife from the road beside the Chilkoot. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) monitors the number and species of salmon that make their way towards the lake.



Both independent and guided travelers, as well as photographers, come to the river to see bears and other wildlife. During the summer of 2000, an estimated 25,000 people used the Chilkoot Lake recreation area. That's about twelve times the population of Haines.

Studying the relationship between all of these



Chilkoot River attracts numerous human and bear anglers.

user groups and the bears is Anthony Crupi, a master's candidate in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Utah State University. Crupi and his team of research volunteers have been collecting data since the summer of 2000.

Crupi estimates that at least fifteen individual bears depend upon the Chilkoot as a feeding area. They consist mainly of females with cubs and subadults (independent bears that have not reached sexual maturity). The bears establish dominance hierarchies among themselves over who gets to catch fish. The Chilkoot acts as a nursery school for bears, says Crupi. Brown bears are incredibly quick learners, and during the 2-3 years they normally spend with their mothers, they incorporate feeding strategies and patterns into their daily lives. People can play a part in this learning process, too. By our learning how to correctly interact with these creatures and keeping human food out of their reach, we can teach them not to associate humans with food.

Last summer, a female bear with three cubs regularly led her offspring downriver through a productive fishing area popular with anglers. Her cubs scampered up onto the road and raced each other back and forth on the bank as she fished. Some anglers deserted their gear when the female approached, complaining as a stringer's worth of fish were eaten. Other fishermen stood their ground during similar encounters. Some photographers boldly approached the cubs, stepping close for the perfect shot of the playful butterballs. Through it all, the mother bear continued fishing, enjoying the entrails

sometimes left on the rocks, and capitalizing on the abandoned fish or human food left in the wake of fleeing humans.

When the salmon run changed and anglers started fishing in the deep fast water where the coho run, the bears followed their lead, visible at the edges of daylight along a sandbar as they stopped to eat. But coho run too deep for bears to catch them easily. Crupi suspects that careless fish cleaning is the reason the bears lingered. Instead of cleaning fish in the river and discarding unwanted parts in the swift deep water, anglers sometimes brush the waste into the slow shallows of the river and leave an easy meal floating there.

It seems these cubs were paying attention.

This year, two abandoned yearlings with very familiar markings appeared on the Chilkoot, staying close together and behaving in the same way that the female with three cubs had the year before. Like her, they found that feeding was fairly easy in the area that anglers



avored, and they too found the rewards of fish parts left over from cleaning in shallow water. At first, people were not alarmed. They

allowed the bears to come close to them, unthreatened by their size. But as they ate, the yearlings grew, and before the end of the summer, although the bears' patterns hadn't changed, a local Fish and Wildlife trooper was wondering whether these "problem bears" should be shot.

That's what motivated ADF&G Wildlife Biologist Polly Hessing to come to Haines. She planned to solve the problem by moving the bears. After discussing the matter with the bear researchers, Hessing agreed that moving the bears would not solve the root cause of the problem, namely bad human behavior.

What were the users of the Chilkoot doing wrong?



Most people have no idea that they are training bears whenever bears are in their presence.

After a bruin learns to be comfortable with people who allow a bear to get close, it is very difficult to change the bear's behavior to stay clear of humans, particularly if food has been involved in the first encounter. Photographers who crowd bears are training them, as are anglers who are not conscientious about their fish cleaning. Even those who don't stop fishing when bears are nearby provide the tantalizing sight of a fish on the line, and bears link that captive fish struggle with the humans nearby. At one point this past summer, the cubs downed a six-pack of Budweiser abandoned by a surprised angler. If he had packed up his gear when he noticed that bears were approaching, he would have saved himself a trip to the liquor store and prevented one more association of humans as the source of an easy meal.

Research has shown that bears benefit when people maintain their distance from bears and act in consistent, predictable ways.

People also affect the way bears feed by limiting their river access or otherwise disturbing them. Travelers often insist on parking their RVs and campers on the road next to the river overnight, leaving no undisturbed time available to the bears. So many vehicles block the road on occasion that the bears can't get to and from the river. Car campers are sometimes careless about food and waste near their vehicles, making it easy for bears to become conditioned to human food. The Wildlife Division of ADF&G is concerned that the increasing human presence may have reached such a level that the bears are unable to get enough food during the summer months to meet their needs.



Concerned about the rising number of human-bear conflicts, a group of individuals and organizations had formed the Chilkoot River Corridor Working Group (CRC) in late 2000 in order to address the problem. They drafted a Code of Conduct for river users, and recommended that a river monitor be appointed to both inform the public about the guidelines and encourage separation between people and bears. After Hessing and the researchers determined that human education was needed on the river, ADF&G secured a grant for a river monitor through CARA funds and Tom Prang was hired as the monitor.

Prang spent the late summer and autumn talking to anglers, photographers, and other visitors about suggested guidelines. According to Burl Sheldon, the CRC staff person, "The people who were out there every day, locals and sport fishers, commercial tour operators, all saw a difference in the level of cooperative behavior this season because of the monitor's presence."

There are still some problems. Most of the guidelines that the river monitor encouraged people to use are not legally required. For the most part, users of the Chilkoot recreation area were interested in learning the results of improper behavior in bear country, but not everyone acquiesced to Tom Prang's requests – in fact, when Prang was not present, people tended to go back to their old ways. Because many new users cycle through the Chilkoot recreation area every day, the monitor teaches the same lesson over and over without seeing the change in habits that might occur if the

user population were more stable. But that's why the river monitor is truly necessary.

The road to the Chilkoot campground has now been closed to overnight camping, which gives bears undisturbed access to the river at night. Unfortunately, there is no further unifying management course that all landowners and stakeholders agree on, such as closing one side of the river to human use, a strategy that has been recommended, or closing the campground at the end of the road to all except day use.

The CRC has its work cut out for it. This year's river monitor grant has expired and the application process required to receive another is long and arduous. Their work is encouraged, however, by the fact that most Haines residents feel having a river monitor has been worth it.

"People understand there's a high economic value in having a watchable bear population," says Sheldon. But when these same bears learn bad habits from people, the end result can be death for the bears.

The river monitor program needs to be continued, and expanded upon with the development of a long-term Chilkoot Corridor plan that recognizes the needs of both bears and people. The original inhabitants of the river corridor were responsible stewards of their home. With conscientious effort, today's Chilkoot users have an opportunity to continue to continue that tradition.

As of this writing, only one yearling of the pair has been seen in the Haines area.

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Ginna Purrington was a volunteer bear researcher on the Chilkoot during the summer of 2001.