What It Means To Be 'Bear Aware'

April 10, 2012

ANCHORAGE BEAR COMMITTEE LOGO

To be "Bear Aware" has come to mean different things to different people and different communities, which is why I am not always a fan of choosing such phrases. At it's most fundamental level "Bear Awareness" emphasizes a commitment to keeping bears wild. It suggests a certain stewardship of these iconic species, a respect for them and the wild places they call home. But in practicality, "Bear Awareness" implies that one is cognizant of bear safety-being safe in bear country.

Every spring, hikers, and campers and others seeking recreational pursuits, pledge to be "Bear Aware." In other words, they pledge to reduce opportunities to invite negative human-bear interactions or conflict with bears when traveling in bear country. This inherently suggests adopting bear safety tactics while exploring and enjoying the great outdoors.

At the community level "Bear Awareness" may be less about personal safety and more about adopting strategies to eliminate or control attractants that draw bears into urban areas. Both definitions are appropriate, but it is important to make the distinction, albeit subtle. All of these issues warrant attention in areas where bears and people coexist, but it very much helps to know the audience before launching a "Bear Awareness" campaign. People are eager to listen and learn about "Bear Awareness," but the instruction must really be relevant.

Part of my role as a member of the Anchorage Bear Committee and as the Chair of the Conservation Education Committee for the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA) is to develop "Bear Awareness" initiatives that cater to both specific communities and demographics of individuals who live in the company of bears.

In Anchorage, for example, Elizabeth Manning, a wildlife educator with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game presides over the Anchorage Bear Committee Education Group. Much of her role and focus is on coordinating "Bear Aware" education programs that serve to disseminate information for the individual on bear safety. Campaigns are aimed at keeping both the individual and the bears safe while in bear country.

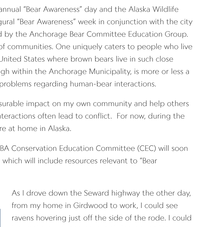


PHOTO BY JORDAN SCHAUL

This year, Alaska's Governor, Sean Parnell, proclaimed the month of April "Bear Awareness" month:

"NOW, THEREFORE, I, Sean Parnell, Governor of the State of Alaska, do hereby proclaim April 2012 as:

-Bear Awareness Month-

in Alaska, and encourage all Alaskans to educate themselves on the importance of awareness and safety issues surrounding Alaska's bears and wildlife, thereby helping to ensure the future of our Alaskan wildlife heritage."

Anchorage's Alaska Zoo will hold their annual "Bear Awareness" day and the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center will host the inaugural "Bear Awareness" week in conjunction with the city of Girdwood. Both events are endorsed by the Anchorage Bear Committee Education Group. And the events target different types of communities. One uniquely caters to people who live in the only metropolitan region in the United States where brown bears live in such close proximity to people. The other, although within the Anchorage Municipality, is more or less a rural community, which faces different problems regarding human-bear interactions.

I, personally, hope to help make a measurable impact on my own community and help others around the world where bear-human interactions often lead to conflict. For now, during the month of April, I will focus on issues here at home in Alaska.

I'm also pleased to announce that the IBA Conservation Education Committee (CEC) will soon launch a web page on the IBA website, which will include resources relevant to "Bear Awareness" and "Bear Safety."

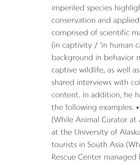


PHOTO BY JORDAN SCHAUL

As I drove down the Seward highway the other day, from my home in Girdwood to work, I could see ravens hovering just off the side of the rode. I could just make out a lone coyote sitting on the ice-covered estuary about 300 meters from a couple bald eagles in the foreground. I couldn't see what attracted them, but I suspected it was a carcass of a moose or what was left of one. I didn't see any sign of bear.

The Portage Valley is, however, home to brown and black bears and I knew they were soon to wake up after a long winter's dormancy. Because of heavy snow cover this year, brown bears will likely emerge from their dens later than black bears, which typically overwinter at lower elevations where less snow accumulates. Sometimes brown bears may select or excavate den sites that are more characteristic of what a black bear may choose to overwinter in and vice verses. Regardless, of when or where they emerge, they are hungry.

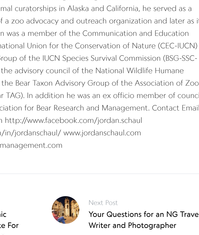


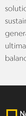
PHOTO BY JORDAN SCHAUL

As I pulled over to watch the scavengers as they arrived in a timely fashion and in succession, it occurred to me that stopping and getting out of my car would not be acting terribly responsible. Bears are waking up and what are they likely to feed on are winter-killed ungulate carcasses, particularly after a winter like we had this year. If you think a grizzly bow defends her young with some vigor, just wait until you see a grizzly bear defend a winter-killed moose carcass. Either scenario places a human bystander in great danger.

As bears begin to wake up, please be respectful of them and of all wildlife and stay safe.

In Changing Planet

Tags Jordan Carlton Schaul



MEET THE AUTHOR

With training in wildlife ecology, conservation medicine and comparative psychology, Dr. Schaul's contributions to Nat Geo Voices have covered a range of environmental and social topics. He draws particular attention to the plight of imperiled species highlighting issues at the juncture or nexus of sorta situ wildlife conservation and applied animal welfare. Sorta situ conservation practices are comprised of scientific management and stewardship of animal populations ex situ (in captivity / 'in human care') and in situ (free-ranging / 'in nature'). He also has a background in behavior management and training of companion animals and captive wildlife, as well as conservation marketing and digital publicity. Jordan has shared interviews with colleagues and public figures, as well as editorial news content. In addition, he has posted narratives describing his own work, which include the following examples: • Restoration of wood bison to the Interior of Alaska while (While Animal Curator at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and courtesy professor at the University of Alaska) • Rehabilitation of orphaned sloth bears exploited for tourists in South Asia (While executive consultant 'in-residence' at the Agra Bear Rescue Center managed by Wildlife SOS) • Censusing small wild cat (e.g. ocelot and margay) populations in the montane cloud forests of Costa Rica for popular publications with 'The Cat Whisperer' Mieshelle Nagelschneider • Evaluating the impact of ecotourism on marine mammal population stability and welfare off the coast of Mexico's Sea of Cortez (With Boston University's marine science program) Jordan was a director on boards of non-profit wildlife conservation organizations serving nations in Africa, North and South America and Southeast Asia. He is also a consultant to a human-wildlife conflict mitigation organization in the Pacific Northwest. Following animal curatorships in Alaska and California, he served as a charter board member of a zoo advocacy and outreach organization and later as its executive director. Jordan was a member of the Communication and Education Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (CEC-IUCN) and the Bear Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (BSG-SSC-IUCN). He has served on the advisory council of the National Wildlife Humane Society and in service to the Bear Taxon Advisory Group of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA Bear TAG). In addition he was an ex officio member of council of the International Association for Bear Research and Management. Contact Email: jordan@jordanschaul.com http://www.facebook.com/jordan.schaul https://www.linkedin.com/in/jordanschaul/ www.jordanschaul.com www.bicoastalreputationmanagement.com

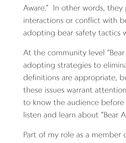
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