

Outdoors

Grizzly Committee Looks to Canada 'Bear Smart' Communities

In British Columbia, communities are encouraged to build bear safe habits into their routine

BY MICHAEL CAST, BILLINGS GAZETTE // DEC 14, 2020

BILLINGS — At the winter meeting of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, Lori Roberts introduced a new tool to keep the peace between grizzly bears and humankind — “bear smart communities,” inspired by the model used in British Columbia, Canada.

Roberts, of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and chair of IGBC’s information, education and outreach committee, said the ski town of Big Sky has already adopted a “bear smart” program, and that spreading the effort to grizzly country in the lower 48 would be coordinated by British Columbia experts, local non-profit People and Carnivores, and the IGBC.

The IGBC’s purpose is to ensure recovery of viable grizzly bear populations in the lower 48, and is made of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park

Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Geological Survey. Representatives come from all over grizzly territory, from Canada to Yellowstone, and out to the Pacific Northwest, the Billings Gazette reported.

In British Columbia, communities are encouraged to build bear safe habits into their routine by first identifying bear-related prob-

lems, then putting bear-friendly solutions, regulations and enforcement into local policy. If garbage is attracting bears, for example, a community might make the use of bear-proof containers a policy, and make sure its community members all use them.

The idea is that by working together, a community can make itself safer and reduce both human-bear conflicts and the number of bears habituated to human food, leading to fewer bears killed by wildlife managers.

It was widely supported that the IGBC should take the lead in implementing the program if it is adopted in the United States.

In British Columbia, where the provincial government has been running the Bear Smart Community program since 2004, the concept is focused largely on black bear conflicts, and some communities received a \$3000 incentive to get started.

Roberts' presentation focused on building partnerships between communities, local bear specialists, and NGOs, with a special focus on the connectivity zones where grizzly bears are just starting to reappear.

Mike Badry, the Wildlife Conflict Manager for British Columbia, said that in achieving nine Bear Smart Communities in Canada, the use of social science expertise was critical in getting communities to buy into the process early. Overall, he considered it a great success.

In Montana, the governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council was made up of 18 people from different walks of life — ranchers, farmers, trail runners, hunters, conservationists and professionals from the timber industry. They have met since October of 2019, and were charged with delving into and reporting on the state's grizzly bear management, conflict prevention and outreach efforts.

After presenting their findings to the IGBC on Thursday, which they released in a report at the end of the summer, three members of the council considered how the proposed concept of Bear Smart Communities would work in Montana. They were in a prime position to do so, having spent the last year trying to understand the needs of communities with grizzlies for neighbors.

"I've said a lot that Montanans are very private and stubborn people. And that's because it's true. So I think there might be a little bit of a challenge there," said Trina Jo Bradley, a rancher and member of the governor's grizzly bear council. "We can't show up and say, hey, we're from the government, and we're here to help, because no one likes that. But if you show up and say, hey, I want to help you, and you're going to tell me how you want that help.

And you're going to be in charge of this whole thing, and I'm going to just give you my resources and help you out, then I think that's the right way to approach it."

Bradley said the idea is great for Montana.

"I really think IGBC is a good home for that project, and I really think that it would have a lot of value if we could get it in motion," she said.

Kim Johnston, who leads conservation nonprofit People and Carnivores' conflict prevention efforts in the High Divide area of southwest Montana is already having success with the concept. Johnston first brought the idea to the IGBC's attention. Johnston said letting a community build its own plan is what makes the Canadian concept workable in Montana.

Chuck Roady, another council member and the vice president and general manager of F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co., said he liked what he heard from Badry, but thinks the concept would have to be tweaked to account for conflicts between bears and people recreating on private lands. He said those conflicts are common on his company's land near Whitefish, Columbia Falls and west of Glacier National Park.

Cole Mannix, another member of the governor's grizzly bear council and part of a five-generation ranching family in western Montana's Blackfoot valley, is also the associate director of conservation nonprofit Western Landowners Alliance.

He said the avenue to success in grizzly-landowner relationships is often forged by local community collaboratives, such as the Big Hole Watershed Committee, the

Rancher Stewardship Alliance in north-central Montana, the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance, and the Winnett ACES.

“That collaborative model is a great way to do business in Montana,” he said, adding that those type of collaboratives would serve as great examples and resources for a bear program.

Not only are grassroots efforts under way in Montana to achieve something similar to the Bear Smart Community concept, but some communities are closely following the Canadian example with success. Kris Inman, the community partnerships coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society, said with some changes the Canadian model is working well in Big Sky, where the community has gone from 20 percent bear-proof trash containers to 80 percent, and the number of human-bear conflicts has been drastically reduced.

Johnston is likewise succeeding in the connectivity zone of southwest Montana.

On Thursday, Mannix also fielded questions regarding the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council’s final report to the governor. IGBC committee member Matt Hogan of U.S. Fish and Wildlife asked a question of common concern during this transitional time in state and federal government.

“As the administrations transition in Montana, do you think the work started under the last administration will continue to progress into the next administration?” Hogan asked.

Mannix answered he thinks it will, although the council’s recommendations for grizzly management make it clear that resources are an issue. Funding, in other words, for

education and management programs will be the biggest concern going forward, he said. As for the social side of the research, he said the council found people from across the aisle were united in wanting to find solutions.

“I think everybody appreciates what we have in Montana, in terms of the landscape, and appreciates the grizzly bear very much in different ways. I think that it’s not a partisan issue,” Mannix said.

The IGBC committee also examined whether increased recreation during the pandemic affected the peace between grizzlies and people. Most of the experts at the meeting reported increased recreation during the pandemic, and an increase in recreation by those uneducated in bear safety, but no notable increase in frequency of grizzly conflicts.

Jennifer Carpenter, who represented the National Parks of the Intermountain Region, did however mention a considerable issue with bears and dumpsters at Glacier National Park, a minor injury caused by a bear in Yellowstone, and the famous grizzly sow, Bear 399, in Grand Teton National Park, who has been for weeks wandering into Jackson Hole with her four cubs.

The pandemic did measurably affect the work of the IGBC in one key way. Large events designed to educate people on dealing with bears — the use of bear spray and the proper storage of bear attractants — had to be canceled.

The online IGBC meeting was held on Dec. 11-13, during which the IGBC board also reviewed its budget and took presentations from its subcommittees, dove into the Bear Resistant Container Program, and looked at recent social science research from Cecily Costello of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The members thanked their chair, Martha Williams, the Director of Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, for her service, as she will be leaving her role with the committee. She was presented with a bear paw plaque, as is tradition at the IGBC.

And of course, no zoom meeting would be complete without technical issues, and no bear-driven meeting would be complete without bear jokes. On Thursday, meeting coordinator David Diamond was battling with a YouTube glitch when he let one slip.

“And thanks, folks, for bearing with us,” he said.

The next meeting of IGBC executives will be held in summer 2021.

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