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Local nonprofit to distribute \$50,000 for communities to launch 'Bear Smart' initiatives

Helena Dore Chronicle Staff Writer
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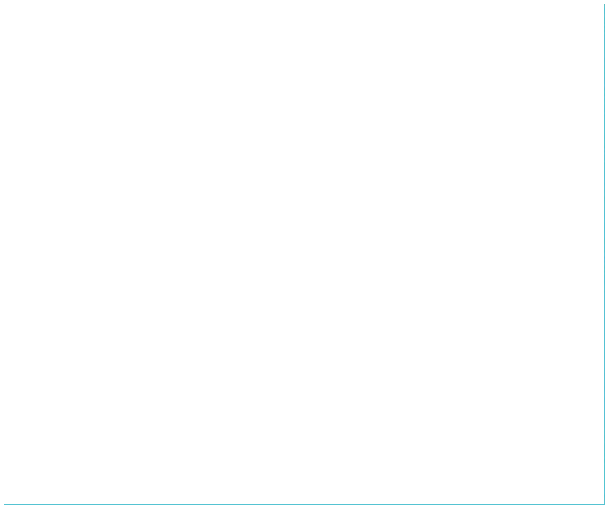
A black bear is pictured as it attempts to access trash in a dumpster.

Courtesy of People and Carnivores

A local organization that works to reduce conflicts between humans and large carnivores has set aside \$50,000 in funding for cities, towns, neighborhoods and other communities in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho to work toward becoming “Bear Smart.”

People and Carnivores, a group that helps people access tools and resources to avoid conflicts with bears, wolves and mountain lions, has established the Bear Smart Community Resource Fund for projects in 2023, with potential for additional funding in 2024 and 2025.

Rosie Costain, coexistence program and communications coordinator for the Bozeman nonprofit, said the goal is to provide financial assistance and consulting services for communities that are interested in, or just getting started on initiatives to prevent human-bear conflicts.



While they vary from town to town, “Bear Smart” efforts can involve proactive measures to keep bears away from attractants like garbage, public education campaigns on avoiding human-bear conflicts and carcass pickup or range rider programs.

The Volgenau Foundation contributed to the fund, and applications are being accepted through 2023, though people are encouraged to apply sooner rather than later, according to Costain. Further information is available at peopleandcarnivores.org/bearresources.

The fund was created about three months after the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, tasked with leading recovery efforts for the federally-protected species, agreed to set up a framework for recognizing Bear Smart communities across the lower 48 states.

Costain said staff at People and Carnivores were happy to see the committee move ahead with the program, which is based on a model in British Columbia. They would like to target geographic areas that are just starting to see grizzlies or are expected to see the bears soon.

Virginia City officials and residents are leading the way. The town has obtained its Bear Smart status by taking steps like securing bear-resistant garbage cans, initiating a fruit gleaning program and educating people about bears, according to Mayor Justin Gatewood.

“We used to have frequent black bear issues, but we’ve had none since doing all this,” Gatewood said in a news release. “Now we’re working to maintain that trend, and I think we’re moving in the right direction.”

Virginia City has developed its own funding structure to make sure projects are sustained, Costain said. Beyond the new \$50,000 fund, other nonprofits and foundations can provide financial support for communities that want to walk a similar path, she added.

Isolated populations of grizzly bears dot Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Washington, and due largely to recovery efforts and federal protections, their numbers have increased significantly in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems.

As the two populations rebound, bears are expanding their territories farther outside of zones that were established for their recovery decades ago. Because of the trend, grizzlies are appearing in towns and on agricultural land they haven’t roamed through in more than a century.

Costain said one of People and Carnivores’ larger goals is to help these isolated grizzly populations connect and exchange genetics, and while the work in Virginia City was in response to black bear conflicts, the group knew grizzlies were getting closer and closer to the town.

Lots of the organization’s projects are done at an individual level, whether its setting up electric fencing around a chicken coop or helping landowners to purchase bear-resistant garbage cans.

While it’s wonderful to help those people, addressing conflicts with carnivores at a city-wide level allows bears to pass through developed areas safely, Costain said.

Applications for Bear Smart Community Resource funding can come from residents in the Northern Rockies region generally, but People and Carnivores hopes to direct the money to towns in the Greater Yellowstone area, specifically western Montana and northern Idaho.

Costain said scare devices, alarms and flashing lights can work well in rural places, but sometimes they are one-off projects. If the funding is used to purchase these tools and others, the nonprofit wants to make sure a more holistic plan is in place.

The money can fund actions like organizing bear spray training sessions, launching bear awareness campaigns, conducting conflict assessments or creating groups or committees charged with starting conflict reduction programs, according to People and Carnivores.

“Both grizzlies and black bears are moving around a lot, and we’ve seen an influx of people and increasing development in the region,” said Lisa Upson, executive director of People and Carnivores, in the release.

“Local residents and businesses working together can make prevention tools effective on a community scale, which helps everyone as well as bears,” she said.

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