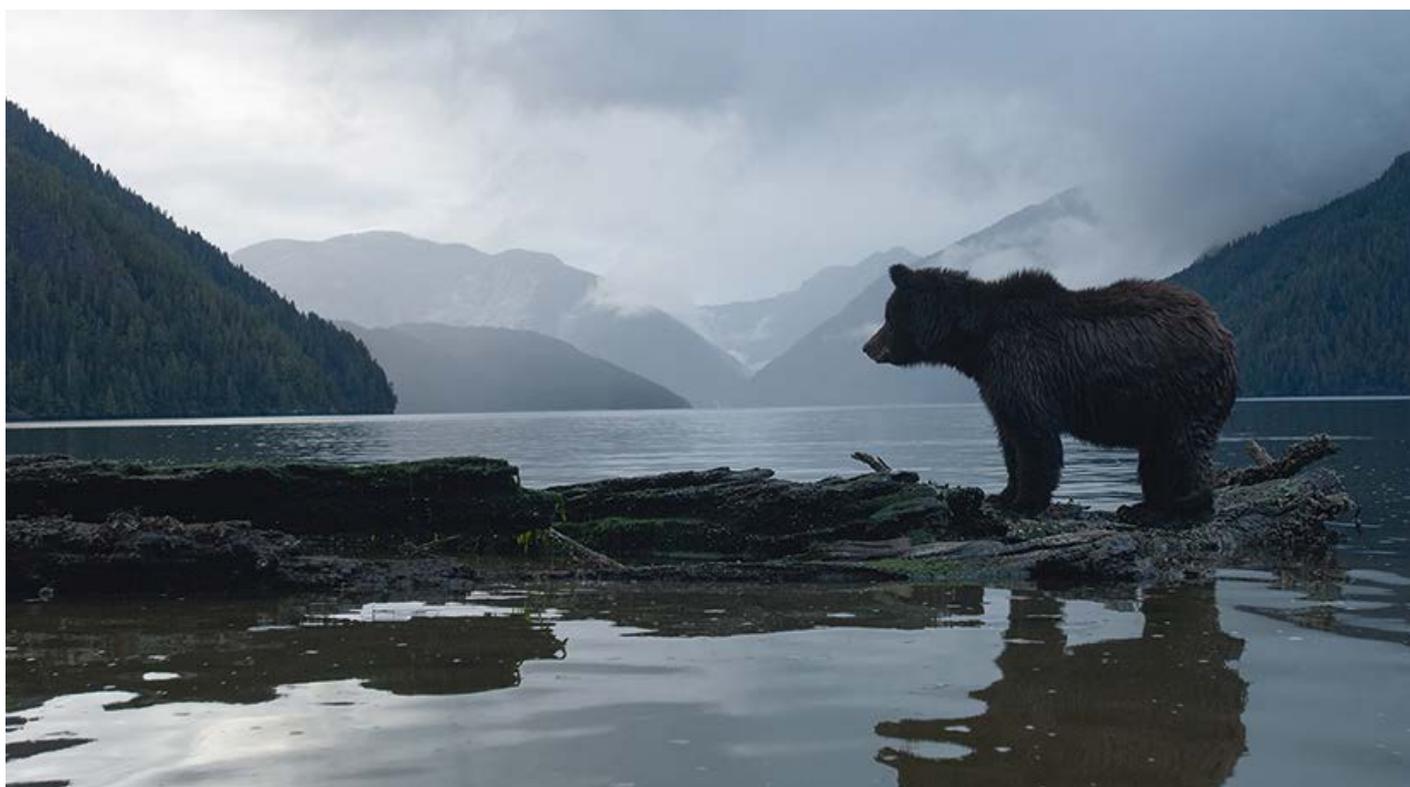
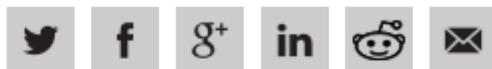


# Grizzly toll: B.C's controversial trophy bear hunt

While bear tourism has become an economic boon, the province is expanding a trophy bear hunt that is controversial with both scientists and First Nations

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Leonard Ellis has spent much of his adult life hunting grizzly up and down B.C.'s sodden central coast. His residence in the Bella Coola Valley, a land of glacier-cut fjords and towering, ancient cedars nearly 1,000 km north of Victoria, is home to the densest concentration of the bears anywhere. "Grizzly country," Ellis calls it. "They're everywhere." And they can be dangerous. In the past six weeks, Western Canada has recorded four grizzly attacks, three of them fatal.

The remote coastal community is also ground zero in the increasingly tense battle between those who believe the bears are best seen through the crosshairs of a high-powered rifle and those who believe they need protecting and should be viewed through the lens of a camera. "The hunt brings money to the community," Ellis says simply. While many in this area, hard hit by declines in logging and fishing, cling to the hunt as a source of income, new data also suggest that tourism is now far outstripping the hunt in economic importance.

Eighty-seven per cent of British Columbians oppose the killing of the province's largest and most iconic animals, according to a recent poll. That even includes some hunters who feel the bears should not be shot for sport. This is a trophy hunt, after all: No part of the animal is eaten. The bears are skinned, their heads removed. The grizzly's denuded corpse, which looks strangely human when shorn of its coat, is left behind to rot.

Such behaviour is anathema to coastal First Nations. A coalition of 14 bands has formed to take on the B.C. government to try to stop what they consider a "senseless slaughter," says Art Sterritt, the powerful executive director of the Coastal First Nations, representing nine bands from the B.C. coast and Haida Gwaii.

The coalition is preparing to use resource projects, including pipelines and mining projects, as leverage, says Sterritt. And they're willing to take the fight to court. "We're going to do everything in our power to stop it," Sterritt says. Last year, the coalition announced a ban on grizzly hunting in their territories. The embargo, which has no legal standing, is being upheld by a volunteer force of mobile rangers who patrol the area by boat, chasing off grizzly hunters throughout B.C.'s spring and fall trophy hunts. Most guide outfitters have begun steering their clients clear of the Bella Coola Valley and an increasingly volatile situation that pits armed hunters, who have paid dearly to participate in the legal hunt, against those who believe they have a fundamental duty to protect the bears.

The science behind the hunt is no less fraught. The B.C. government believes 15,000 grizzly bears reside in the province, and that the current “harvest”—the 350 bears hunted in B.C. every year—is well within its stated “maximum allowable mortality rate” of six per cent. Conducting a rolling census of the bears would be prohibitively expensive, so government biologists rely on modelling to arrive at population estimates. But independent biologists have been sounding the alarm over the B.C. government’s bear science. They believe the province has consistently and, perhaps, dramatically, overestimated the size of the grizzly population.

Carnivore biologist Chris Darimont believes there could be as few as 6,000 grizzlies in B.C. Darimont, who teaches at the University of Victoria, accuses the government of producing “junk science,” of padding its count to justify the hunt’s continued existence.

Admittedly, the provincial government has done a few things to sow doubt. In 1990, for example, it unilaterally doubled the bear’s herd size: to 13,160, up from 6,600. Government scientists based the sudden inflation on a single study of B.C.’s southeastern Flathead Range. In 2000, it suppressed the work of one of its own biologists, Dionys de Leeuw, for suggesting the hunt was excessive and could be pushing the bears to extinction. De Leeuw was later suspended without pay for having pursued the line of inquiry. Soon after, the government fought a five-year legal battle to try to avoid releasing its grizzly kill data.

“It was like trying to get hold of a state secret,” says Raincoast Conservation Foundation executive director Chris Genovali, who spearheaded the legal campaign. “Clearly, they didn’t want anyone scrutinizing their management of the hunt.” In 2004, the European Union banned the import of grizzly trophies from B.C., stating that the hunt was not environmentally sound.

“I’m appalled by the inadequacy of government science,” says Wayne McCrory, a staff biologist with the Valhalla Wilderness Society. McCrory believes it is “unethical” to use “such shaky science” to manage the hunt of an animal with such fragile population dynamics. Grizzlies, McCrory adds, have the lowest reproduction rate of North American land mammals. This makes them highly vulnerable and slow to recover from population declines. Although shooting females is frowned upon, it is almost impossible to tell males from females. One-third of the 3,500 grizzlies shot by trophy hunters in the last decade in B.C. were females.

In the end, the market may be the ultimate arbiter: The bears, it seems, are worth

more alive than dead. A recent Stanford University study showed that bear-viewing in the Great Bear Rainforest, the 400-km-long temperate rainforest surrounding Bella Coola, is creating 27 times more employment and 12 times more in visitor spending than the trophy hunt. Province-wide, nature-based tourism is generating \$2 billion a year, and directly employs 13,000 British Columbians. Of that total, a mere \$116 million is generated by hunting and outfitting, says Scott Ellis, executive director of the Guide Outfitters Association of B.C. Last year, just 67 tourists came to B.C. to shoot grizzly. This year, a single lodge brought 2,300 tourists to B.C. to view bears.

Even Ellis, one of the province's best-known trophy hunters, has switched sides: "I saw the writing on the wall," he explains. In 2005, Ellis sold his hunting-outfitting licence, covering 25,000 sq. km, for \$1.3 million. The 59-year-old poured the proceeds into Bella Coola Grizzly Tours, one of 50 bear-viewing firms now operating in the Great Bear Rainforest. "Change happens," says Ellis, "whether we like it or not."

The business models share some commonalities: Both grizzly hunting and viewing cater to a well-heeled, international clientele willing to pay a premium for fly-in rainforest lodgings. Five days at Klemtu's Native-owned Spirit Bear Lodge, which offers both grizzly and **kermode bear** tours, for example, costs \$4,200. They differ, of course, in their approach. Where successful hunts rely on the element of surprise, the goal, when viewing bears, is to become a neutral, predictable presence, says Tim McGrady, who manages the Spirit Bear Lodge: "If we show up at the same time, at the same place, and behave in the same manner, the bears will treat us as part of the scenery."

So, every morning of the lodge's past season, which closed in early October—ahead of rains that will dump 4½ metres of water on Bella Coola—McGrady visited a mother grizzly and her three playful cubs on Princess Royal Island off B.C.'s north coast. He watched the cubs, the size of a small box when he first encountered them in June when they were five months old, gallop goofily over the tidal flats, clumsily wrestle on slippery, kelp-covered rocks, and collapse, coma-like, into deep naps after nursing. When McGrady started guiding 15 years ago at Knight Inlet Lodge, the first resort offering grizzly tours in Canada, his son was two; his behaviour, he says, was almost identical to the cubs he spent his days tracking.

With the fall grizzly hunt under way in B.C. (it opened on Oct. 1), demand is

stronger than ever. This year, B.C. expanded its trophy hunt, opening it to two areas where it was previously banned, and bumping the number of hunting licences to 1,800, from 1,700 in 2013. (Most people who are given a licence will not end up shooting a bear.) Whether the science supports the jump is ultimately irrelevant, says Paul Paquet, Raincoast's senior conservation scientist. It serves only to distract from the more fundamental questions the trophy hunt raises. On the one hand are people like Al Martin with the B.C. Wildlife Federation, the province's powerful hunting lobby, who believe the bears are a "public property." On the other are those who believe the shaggy brown predators, which can stand as high as a basketball net and weigh more than a Toyota Corolla, symbolize just about everything that is wild, primal and untameable about British Columbia.

"We can argue over the science until we're blue in the face," says Paquet. But, ultimately, "science doesn't give us permission to do anything we want. These are questions we have to sort out in a different way."



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