



Creating Habitat for Grizzlies by Learning to Live With Them

by Charlie Russell

My talk will be about what our bears in Kamchatka taught me about an important point that for some reason I have erroneously misconstrued most of my life. There is a popular concept that man should not consider himself as a part of nature - that we are intruders and pariahs in the natural world. When you think of it, of course we are a part of nature; we really only have a choice of whether our influence will be positive or will it be negative. They taught us that if we choose to be respectful, living in their world was not about being tough, feeling puny, or about suffering. It is about fitting into the landscape without conflict. It is a realization of when to be afraid, when to laugh and when to find shelter. Most profoundly, it is about the art of how not to be a nuisance to those who are born to be wild.



Biography for Charlie Russell

2003

Charlie Russell is a 61 year old ex rancher, turned grizzly bear researcher. Very few people have spent as much time closely observing the nature of these animals in their natural habitat. His observations include 18 years studying how grizzlies used and shared his ranchland with his cattle. His ranch is situated on the boundary of Waterton/Glacier International Park near the border between Alberta and Montana.

He is the author of the book *Spirit Bear -- Encounters With The White Bear Of The Western Rainforest*, which is about his experiences working and living with the Kermode bears of Princess Royal Island, without causing the usual strife associated with sharing close quarters.

For the past seven years he and his partner Maureen Enns have lived within a very dense population of brown bears in Kamchatka Russia. This 8 year study was conceived with the goal of answering two questions, important to all those who have to manage bear-human contact: (1) are grizzly bears unpredictable, and (2) are they inherently dangerous when they have no fear of humans.

In all, Charlie has spent the best part of 42 years pondering and testing the possibilities that bears are peaceful animals who are safe for humans to live closely with, as long as the bears are not abused. At the heart of this study were three orphaned cubs rescued from a Russian zoo and once more, successfully given a second chance to live in the wild. To gain maximum understanding of whether there is danger if bears do not have fear of humans these bears were never discouraged from being friendly with people. This has never been an issue. At age six, one of them will have her own cubs in 2003.

The pursuit for answers to many troublesome questions about grizzlies are chronicled in Charlie and Maureen's latest, national best selling book, *Grizzly Heart - Living Without Fear Among the Brown Bear Of Kamchatka*.



Wild Lands Advocate 11(6): 21 - 22, December 2003

SETBACKS FAIL TO DETER GRIZZLY RESEARCHER

By Andy Marshall

Charlie Russell's quest to promote bears as peace-loving, even affectionate animals is still on track – despite a year of setbacks that sparked doubts about whether he would carry on.

The illegal slaughter of up to 20 bears in the Russian wilderness park he and his partner Maureen Enns have been visiting to study grizzly for more than eight years, the savage death of friends Timothy Treadwell and Amie Huguenard after an Alaskan grizzly attack in early October, and sniping against his efforts by some wildlife biologists have left him undeterred.

Facing down the apparent intent of the shootings to intimidate him from his work, the 61-year-old self-styled researcher, ex-rancher and author is pushing for more private funding to carry on the almost six-year-old ranger program he began in the Kamchatka Sanctuary on the northeast coast of Russia to help protect the bears he's come to care for so intensely.

Although one major funder has withdrawn, Russell has another source. "I think I can find the money. I'm trying to renew another six-year program," he said in an interview.

And buoyed by the changing stance in at least one high-profile United States wilderness park toward bear/human interactions, he vows to continue spreading his message in North America that bears and humans can co-exist harmoniously.

"Humans have to learn to be less of a nuisance to bears," Russell said.

The comments came as the soft-spoken Cochrane area resident prepared for his presentation to about 90 members and guests of the Alberta Wilderness Association on Nov. 21 as guest speaker for the third annual Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust lecture series. Together with The Calgary Foundation, AWA formed the trust from an endowment fund, initiated in 1986 as a memorial tribute to the former Orval Pall, killed in an airplane crash while studying bighorn sheep.

Some of the many thousands of slides he and Enns have taken of their breathtakingly close encounters with bears drew "oohs" and "aahs" from the appreciative AWA audience.

Introducing him, master of ceremonies and former AWA president Peter Sherrington noted Russell is seeking to buck conventional wisdom that bears are dangerous to people and unpredictable. That willingness to challenge current thinking continues the tradition set by the two previous guest lecturers: University of Alberta renowned water specialist David Schindler dispelling the notion in 2001 that we are blessed with lots of water; and Montana economist professor and author Tom Power shooting down the myth that the extraction industry enhances a region's economy.

As bear-book author Jeff Rennie pointed out in a recent edition of *Backpacker* magazine, "this unlikely peacemaker ... with unruly silver hair, large glasses and a toothy overbite that causes him to lisp ... with just a twelfth-grade education, no university affiliation, and no backing from any government wildlife agency ... is an anomaly in the bureaucratic, doctorate-laden world of bear research."

Showing shots of him lying in the grass with a bear, swimming with one and touching the paw of another, Russell noted gently: "This is obviously an animal with feeling and intelligence." He added: "We soon learned that bears want to be around people.... We explored the limits of trust." And in answer to a later





question: "They're not like dogs, they don't want to please people, [but] you could sense their enjoyment of things, if they were in a good mood. They aren't cuddly, but they are affectionate animals."

Grizzly Heart: Living without Fear among the Brown Bears of Kamchatka (Random House of Canada), the latest book by Russell and Enns, is filled with photos of the magnificent yet playful bears and the glorious landscape of the 2,000-sq km World Heritage Site they've spent so much time in. About half the area of Kananaskis Country and blessed with an abundance of wildlife and fish in a terrain filled with stunning volcanic mountains, Kamchatka is home to an estimated 8,000 brown bears.

The son of celebrated Alberta naturalist, rancher, author and guide Andy Russell, Charlie first learned about bears growing up on the family ranch, about 55 km southwest of Pincher Creek. Accompanying his dad while he was making a film about grizzly in 1961 had a life-changing impact on him.

After receiving permission from Russian authorities to build a simple cabin there in 1996, the couple used the area to release three orphan bears from a zoo in Petropavlovsk, the regional capital. Over the years, they have spent countless hours walking with the trio and meeting other bears, never sensing any threat from them.

The trio and other bears they came to know are believed to be victims of what Russell thinks is a poaching gang, angry that Russell's protection program is restricting potentially lucrative sales of bear parts.

While he has suspicions about who the culprits are, he doesn't believe a prosecution will be forthcoming in a country where bribery is still rampant. Yet with future funding relatively secure, he hopes to continue to hire the up to ten people needed to run the ranger program there. He and Enns will likely be there again in the spring, taking the Kolb ultra-light aircraft he uses to fly around the region.

He understands well the irony that the bears were mostly likely killed because of the success of his protection program.

Treadwell's and Huguenard's deaths came as an understandable shock. "It makes me sober about the possibility of that happening to myself," he said in the pre-lecture interview. Yet he feels that the American bear researcher made himself vulnerable to such an attack by not taking sufficient precautions to protect himself against the very occasional male predator bear he might come across.

Russell uses portable electrified fences around areas he is sleeping in – the Kamchatka cabin perimeter is powered from solar panels – and rarely ventures out without pepper spray (although he has never used it). In his book, he advised Treadwell to take such precautions, and in their last face-to-face chat earlier in the year, he urged him even more adamantly to take better care. "It was ironic we had this hassle going on. That was our last conversation," Russell said.

He's often heard the criticisms from other bear researchers that what he's doing is foolish and unscientific; that his approach to bear/human interaction will actually hurt North American grizzly conservation; that his "live gently" world is unrealistic and naive.

"Most criticisms come from people having to manage bears and people. I sympathize ... but it is the human part that is harder to manage."

On the academic slights: "I'm not trained to be a biologist, but I refuse to be slowed up by those limitations. Research can be done successfully without absolute qualifications."





His 40 years working with bears is enough to give him confidence to assert that humans, not bears, are the problem. He was greatly encouraged by a recent conference in Missoula, Montana, where Yellowstone park officials outlined plans for bear habituation for bear/human relationships, rather than the conventional adverse conditioning practice followed in all Canadian parks. In other words, a park with almost as many visitors as Banff has decided not to try to frighten off bears from most areas where humans might be.

It's hard to imagine that happening here, said Russell, where wildlife officials routinely fire rubber bullets and set off noise devices to scare bears away from where people congregate. That response creates bears that are fearful of and angry with people.

However, Russell said he will devote his energies toward trying to restrict the adverse conditioning practices and helping people interact better with bears. That could mean suggesting to people they stay well away from bear territory when they're fattening up in late summer, or simply stepping aside when they see a bear on the trail ahead of them.

A vital lesson from the bears in Kamchatka, which had little to no contact with humans, is that almost all bears have no argument with humans as long as people don't impede their ability to live and as long as they haven't been conditioned to fear humans.

"It may take some generations, but I want to show that humans are sophisticated enough to learn this," he says.

