

Lessons from the Crowsnest Pass BearSmart Program:

Work with the community, work with the bears

By Sean Nichols, AWA Conservation Specialist



When Fish and Wildlife district officer John Clarke got involved with the Crowsnest Pass BearSmart program nine years ago the program had a handful of bear-proof bins to its name and a couple of volunteers. But there was little organizational direction and no-one really seemed to know how to employ these resources.

One of Clarke's first actions after joining the program was to enlist the help of Christy Pool, who was brought on board as the program's Field Supervisor and Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Since that time the program has evolved into one of the most successful, effective, and well-received BearSmart programs in the province. Earlier this year it was selected as a finalist in Alberta's annual Emerald Award competition.

"John just took the program and ran with it," recalls Pool. She relates how, early on, Clarke saw the need for such a program in the community and was committed to do what it took to make it work.

Pool is quick to credit not only Clarke, but all of the volunteers and the community as a whole for the success of the program. Two of the biggest differences she cites between the Crowsnest Pass experience and that in other communities in Alberta involve working with the community, and perhaps surprisingly, working with the bears.

Priority 1: Include the bears

Rather than focusing solely on matters

of garbage and attractants, the Crowsnest Pass BearSmart program is proactive about getting out and monitoring the bears themselves. Bears in the vicinity of the municipality are radio-collared and monitored, their movements tracked day and night. BearSmart patrols staffed with program volunteers are active around the clock so that when calls come in, they are already prepared and able to respond more quickly.

On the other hand, if the bears are staying out of trouble and away from problem areas, the BearSmart team wants to know so that they can keep it that way. The focus then is not on keeping bears far away from humans, but only far enough away to avoid conflict. Through the program Alberta Fish and Wildlife established a network of "red zones" around town. As long as the bears stay out of the red zones, they are generally left alone. "After all," explains Pool, "we live in the mountains and the bears live here too."

Priority 2: Include the community

Community buy-in is the other essential component of the program. This is generated through ample volunteer opportunities, as well as education, community events, involvement of school classes, and other forms of engagement. Pool is adamant that success only comes when communities take ownership of programs like BearSmart. "They can see that we aren't only out there speaking on behalf of the bears," she explains, "but that we actually care about the bears. They can see

how this is everyone's community."

Pool enthusiastically relates how over time calls are coming in faster and how it has become not just the volunteers but the entire community who excitedly phone in sightings. She describes how the mentality of bear management has changed and improved over time: once the attitude was that bears should be either left alone or shot. Now the community possesses a sense of ownership over the bears themselves and many people in the Crowsnest are able to identify individual ursine residents in the valley.

It is not only the people but also businesses and local government that have all come on board the BearSmart bandwagon. The BearSmart team has taken an active role in working with the municipal government; the latest bylaws include a section on attractants and garbage. Team members also work alongside local emergency and first responders such as the fire department and RCMP. BearSmart volunteers were on-hand to help out following recent years' flooding and were able to identify and call in gas leaks and other potential issues.

Priority 3: Include the volunteers

The volunteers, not Clarke and not Pool, really form the core of the program. The program has integrated well with the community, not least because of the diversity of BearSmart's many volunteers. Students, retired military personnel, biologists, paramedics, stay-at-home mothers – all manner of people have signed up



BearSmart on the Doorstep: One key to the success of the Crowsnest Pass BearSMART Program is raising community awareness. Pictured here are Christy Pool (l) and Lisa Kinnear (r). PHOTO: © J. CLARKE

to volunteer.

A common thread among all the volunteers is the search for the opportunity to pursue passionately something they believe in. “It’s why many of them moved to the Crowsnest Pass to begin with,” explains Pool. “They wanted a peaceful, beautiful community to live in, and part of that is the wildlife aspect.”

Passion is certainly necessary. A volunteer shift monitoring bear movements may run through the night, starting at 7:30 pm and not ending until 4 or 5 the following morning. After all, as Pool shrugs, “the animals make their own schedule.”

But the volunteers’ passion breeds a willingness to show up and repeat the shifts

again and again. Pool once again credits the sense of ownership volunteers have in the program. BearSmart officers work with volunteers to ensure they can take part in every aspect of the job. Before even starting, volunteers undergo many hours of training: bear safety, proper monitoring, and talking to people about bears are all skills the volunteers learn. Then for their first season (running from April through November) volunteers are attached to a mentor – often another more experienced volunteer – to take them through the job. After a year of training, according to Pool, it’s pretty clear who’s actually committed to the program.

And there are many jobs to do – the

monitoring and education aspects are key of course. But volunteers also teach courses and pick apples and cut down apple trees (with permission) to reduce attractants. They perform assessments for people who are unsure and want to know, for example, why bears are attracted to their yards. They offer school talks where they demonstrate how culvert traps work: when there’s a bear in a culvert trap, volunteers come in to talk to students, to demonstrate what happens to a bear caught in them and why. This removes the students’ curiosity about traps so they don’t get caught in one themselves. “Lots of safety stuff,” says Pool.

An evening of excitement

Last year was easily the busiest summer in the program's history. In 2014 there were 33 black bears in town and six grizzlies, all of which kept the volunteers going "24/7." Another Fish and Wildlife officer was brought in to support the program and the phones wouldn't stop ringing.

The weather was hot and dry last summer and, with their usual berry patches all dried up, the bears had to go somewhere to eat – that often ended up being inside the town limits.

One evening while Clarke was driving down the street his bear dog, Koda, alerted him to a bear in the vicinity. Clarke stopped the vehicle, opened the door and Koda quickly ran out, treeing a bear in a matter of seconds. After a radio call, a few other volunteers came by to help. As the volunteers were observing the treed bear, with officers making plans to sedate and process it, Koda suddenly ran off.

"It serves as a good reminder," recalls Pool, "that when there's one bear in the vicinity, always look for more."

Not 20 metres away, Koda quickly had a second bear up an adjacent tree. She was the only one who had noticed.

It wasn't long before the entire neighbourhood was out in the street, with the RCMP in attendance, looking at the two bears up in two trees in the same yard. Everyone, public and volunteers alike, had a really good learning experience and new volunteers "thought it was the coolest thing."

Program volunteers logged over 1,175 hours – 49 twenty-four hour days – during that busy season.

Busy or not, it's all been a satisfying experience for Clarke and Pool. It's especially gratifying to see how the community has come around.

Pool claims this has been one of the fundamental lessons learned from the experience: "When you include the community in a certain goal, and it's something being done as a whole, they feel like they have a full understanding of the program." The connection between programs and government is crucial. "Partnership is important." 🐾

Alberta Fish and Wildlife's Crowsnest Pass BearSmart Program consists of local certified volunteers that are used to assist in managing two species of bears within the Crowsnest Pass area.

Over several years community projects have been in place aiming at managing bear behaviour and coexistence between wildlife and humans.

Goals of the program include:

- Reducing the number of bear mortalities,
- Reducing the amount of time spent on bear complaints,
- Reducing the number of bear relocations,
- Reducing the number of bear encounters with the public, and
- Identifying travel corridors used by the resident bear population.



BearSmart in the Field: One key to the success of the Crowsnest Pass BearSmart Program is the fieldwork of Koda, John Clarke's Karelian Bear Dog. PHOTO: © J. CLARKE