



Wild Lands Advocate 13(2): 26 – 28, April 2005

## Assessing Human Relationships with Bears: Charlie Russell's Point of View

Dear Editor:

I am puzzled and disappointed that naturalist groups would support and promote the notion that habituating large predators to the presence of humans is a good idea. Perhaps I have a poor understanding of what Charlie Russell's program (research?) is about. Is it about semi-domesticating grizzly bears? If so, how could anyone view that as a positive? How will it benefit grizzly bears?

There is nothing novel about taming bears. Historically, the Russians did it for their circus and Hollywood does it for their movies.

Besides the obvious ethical problem, there is one of safety both to bears and humans. Habituated bears are easy targets for vehicles, hunters, and poachers. Can you really trust a semi-domesticated grizzly bear? Who wants them? Wouldn't they become a nuisance? National parks spend large sums of money trying to undo the effects of habituation.

Let bears be wild. The best way for humans and large predators to coexist is through mutual respect and yes, some fear. I don't want a grizzly to lick my hand like a dog. I want to see him running wild and free in his natural habitat the way he is meant to. I believe that habituating bears to humans provides only costs with no benefits. Precious resources are wasted that would be better used to protect large tracts of suitable habitat where grizzlies can continue to function as a great symbol of wilderness. Tarnishing this great symbol will most certainly detract from wilderness. Natural systems need less contact with humans, not more. Wildlife and people should remain totally separated whenever possible; interference is only warranted when it is absolutely necessary.

Again, I am surprised that a program like Charlie Russell's, which seems so contrary to the best interests of natural systems, is not being recognized as a conflict of interest by groups whose mission it is to promote wilderness. Is taming grizzly bears so much different from game farming?

Reg Ernst

### ***Charlie Russell responds:***

Dear Editor:

In response to the letter sent to you by Reg Ernst, he might find it shocking or even horrific when I tell him that I talk to many people around the world about this issue and that there are an amazing number who see some merit in what I am doing, including the executive of the AWA, even though there are probably some among their ranks who have also long used the grizzly bear as a tool to win hard-fought battles to secure wilderness by insisting that these bears can only survive in that setting. At one time I did the same, but I eventually realized it that it was counter-productive by not being very beneficial to the grizzly bear.

People like Mr. Ernst have always used the word "respect" interchangeably with fear. I think what he describes on his park jaunts are fearful bears, not necessarily wild or respectful bears. Why would they not be? As he says, much of the Park's energy goes into making them fearful and keeping them that way in order to keep people and bears separate. I understand their worries, but it is the people they can not





control, mostly because they have never tried to do that. They would rather curtail the bears' activities. Years ago I took it on to try to understand if all this harshness was really necessary because it displaces bears from many areas they need.

There are several problems with his assumptions stated in his letter. Most of them are to do with his being content with popular belief and the status quo. I got exploring popular belief because I saw problems for the bear with what was always stated as fact about them. In particular, there was the insistence that they are 1. unpredictable and 2. inherently dangerous once they lose their fear of humans. I thought it important to understand, very clearly, these things because over the past few hundred years, these two beliefs have been responsible for thousands of bears being killed just because they wanted to inhabit the same land that we do.

When bear viewing began to gain popularity as a way to make money from live bears instead of dead ones, I was one of the first guides in Canada of this ilk. I had a big problem because the same officials who set the rules for hunting them also decided what criteria should be used for just watching them. I found soon enough that assumptions by these people did not fit what happened when bears were not punished for being around people.

It was soon evident that they quickly begin to like people once they understood that humans were there every day to take an interest in what they were doing and were not going to hurt them. The delight which people had for what they experienced was quickly picked up on and appreciated by these very intelligent animals. It is a totally different world when one is close enough hear the faintest noises they make, able to see them eat a single insect, and get to understand their emotions as they change.

To illustrate a similar situation with another species, one of my seasoned clients told me a story about what he had experienced in Scammons Lagoon in Baja, where the Mexicans had not followed the Americans' lead by making it a crime to be close to the grey whales while whale watching. In the lagoon, the guides would take them out in Zodiacs, shut off their outboard motors, and let the whales come to them, which they always did.

There was mutual delight when people stroked them around their big eyes, only inches away from their own eyes. He told me of a female whale birthing a calf a few meters away from them. As soon as it was free of her body, she nudged the calf to the surface for its first breath and a few moments later she pushed the calf over to the Zodiac to let the amazed people touch it. It was clearly something the mother wanted her calf to experience and the sooner the better. These are animals that were thought to be extinct from over-hunting until the 1940s, when a few were discovered in that very lagoon.

Even though it had happened two years previously, this man could not tell me about this without tears running down his cheeks. He told me because the experiences he had with the grizzlies of the Khutzeymateen were similar. I had just used my canoe paddle to hold against a bear's chest as a restraint to tell it that it was as close as I wanted it to be to my guests. They were only a meter or so behind me when I did this, following my instructions by talking calmly to the bear. Everyone was having an incredible time.

Later, in Russia, I have had females who, as soon as they understood that I was trustworthy, left their cubs with me to babysit while they enjoyed some freedom from their otherwise unending responsibilities to keep them safe.

I understand that Mr. Ernst has been taught all his life that humans are not and should not consider themselves a part of nature and that it is not possible to be really accepted into wild animals' lives. What he has missed somewhere in his education is that all this wild and tame stuff is just a state of mind. Humans don't have to be a contaminant of the wilderness. If the bears I have hobnobbed with have





taught me anything it is that, of course we are a part of nature – what else are we if not that? We can only choose – are we going to be a positive part or a negative part.

The hunter/bear viewer officials hated what I did because in the hunting side of their job, it was customary to charge about \$10,000 dollars for a grizzly killing licence. If word got out that the grizzly was really a peace-loving animal and had the propensity to like people and be safe around them, having put down their guns, they might not be able to sell enough licenses to pay their salaries.

Eventually I realized that I had to stop using my bear viewing clients as guinea pigs and I decided to do a personal study. I set out with my partner, Maureen Enns, to learn about what made bears tick. My study has not been about domesticating bears or habituating them, whatever that means. It is about the possibility of learning to share the land with them, and I guess that because I am not a scientist, you might argue that I have never been a researcher. So be it, but no one in the world has spent more time living with brown bears. For 45 years I have pondered this idea of humans and grizzly bears co-existing much better than we do.

Before I wrote *Spirit Bear: Encounters with the White Bear of the Western Rainforest* or guided bear viewers and before I went to Russia, I had ranched for 18 years up against Waterton Park, where there are plenty of grizzlies. I encouraged the grizzlies to feel comfortable on my land and looked carefully at whether the threat they posed for my cattle and for myself was real.

This experience was the first of many that made me realize that there was a huge amount of mythology about this animal, that they were basically peaceful if we would ever allow them to be peaceful, and that they at least were willing to share land with us if we would let them. This was an important realization because they need productive land as much as we do, not the rock and ice Reg and others would like to relegate them to.

I got thinking that if people could relax about allowing them to be in the front country and the corridors of our National Parks and on our ranch land, we could recreate a huge amount of habitat for them just by understanding a much truer side of their nature. Of course, this would mean that people would have to give up using them the way they have been doing, insisting that they are synonymous with pure wilderness. Of course they are a "great symbol of wilderness," but they are more than that.

Eleven years ago I got real serious about looking at what was possible in this regard. If there was still a place left, I wanted to go there and live with them on their terms. I found what might have been the last chance to do this in Russia. Everywhere else in the world was guarded by people who believed that bears should only exist in fear of humans.

This place I found still had a large number of brown bears. I built a cabin among them and saw to it that their experiences with me would build on their trust rather than giving them the usual experiences of violence and persecution that man has inflicted on them ever since the gun was invented. Before that time it was quite simple: we had to get along with them or get out of the country they wanted to live in. I had no gun.

My Eden for the bears lasted for seven years before the status quo caught up with this place again. It is too long a story to relate here, but I confirmed, without a doubt, that brown bears are not unpredictable – humans are. Also, that they give back what they receive. As long as they are treated kindly you can trust them explicitly. It appears that there are a very few individual males who turn predator toward humans when they are old, but these few bears probably built up a long hatred for people from their experiences with them. I have not been around these kind of animals for their full lifetime to see if they too could be trusted if they had a benign history with us.





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I am not suggesting that others should do what I have done ever again. I just had to set the record straight about who was the problem in the bear/human relationship.

So Reg, you can keep going into the wilderness feeling like an intruder if you want. Perhaps that is a real comforting feeling for you. You can look down your nose at me, but I don't mind telling you that I am proud that I have taken what might have been the last opportunity to have a careful look at whose fault it is that we can't share the land with the grizzly bear. This might never have been an issue with you, but it has been for me because I like sharing. As I said, what I have found out might never be important if the status quo is what you want to maintain, until we don't have any bears. But if the next generation wants to do things differently, they might find something useful in what I have learned.

Charlie Russell

