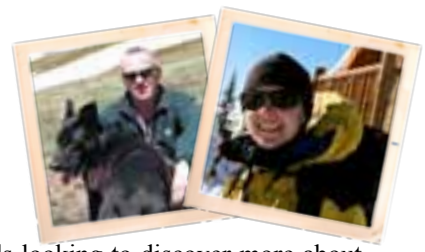


LESSONS IN CONSERVATION FROM THE GREAT GROWLING GRIZZLIES

BY CATHY WILSON, MADELINE WILSON, AND NIGEL DOUGLAS



year olds looking to discover more about grizzly bears? Their shining, bright eyes closely examined Nigel’s grizzly artefacts, as he shared many fascinating facts with these inquisitive grade one and two students. Their teacher asked Nigel to field some important questions, many of which the adults present never thought to ask, such as: “Why don’t grizzlies poop while they are hibernating?” “Is it true that while mother grizzlies are hibernating, they sometimes don’t notice they have given birth to twins?” This seven-year old knew that no mother could comfortably snooze through the birth of twins, no matter how deeply she was sleeping!

Little Smoky the bear, AWA’s mascot, even made a guest appearance and led the class in a rousing round of “Little Smoky Says.” Nigel and Little Smoky helped demonstrate what to do (and what not to do) if you encounter a bear while hiking. Not surprisingly, the students knew the best way to make sure people and bears stay safe is to avoid running into bears at all by making lots of noise.

It was amazing to see the depth of their understanding of natural environments. These lucky students live close to nature in the Bragg Creek area and their families likely spend lots of time outdoors. Their teacher did a superb job of fostering environmental learning in a supportive, reflective environment. Yes, these kids were wise beyond their years. They understood the importance of keeping grizzly bears on the landscape and how the actions of adults compromise the important habitat grizzlies need to survive. These Great Growling Grizzlies will likely grow up to be responsible and wise citizens who understand the intrinsic value of wilderness and learn to tread lightly upon the landscape.

Environmental Education: the Root of Conservation Values

It seems there is a no better way to learn or re-learn some lessons about life than to spend time with children. The Banded Peak students were no exception. We expected to start with some grizzly basics: what bears eat, where they live, and the things they need to survive. Well by the time the students finished telling *us* all about grizzlies, we were about fifteen minutes into our hour-



Our days at AWA can range from attending meetings and workshops, to plugging away in front of a computer screen, to assembling, disassembling and grooming KC, the enormous grizzly bear model who welcomes visitors to the AWA office. In early October, an elementary school teacher approached AWA and invited us to visit her class at Bragg Creek’s Banded Peak Elementary School and offer her students a presentation about grizzly bears. When we learned of the interest with which these grade one and two students had embraced the topic – the students were so enthusiastic they named themselves the “Great Growling Grizzlies” –

AWA knew we had better pay these students a visit. Now we may claim to know a thing or two about grizzly bears, but when confronted with the task of keeping a classroom full of children sitting and listening quietly for sixty excruciating minutes, Madeline decided to call in a real expert. Madeline’s mother, a recently retired elementary school teacher with an eerie ability to command the attention of a room with a mere waggle of “the finger,” agreed to be deputized and accompany AWA on the field trip.

Reflections from Deputy Cathy Wilson

What could be more heartening for conservationists than 20 enthusiastic seven-

long presentation, and we were obviously going to need to do a lot more to impress these savvy grizzly-enthusiasts!

Upon leaving, we were blown away by the breadth of knowledge and experience these children had of the natural world. They were masters of more than facts and data; they seemed to understand both the problems facing Alberta's grizzly bears, the solutions, and the need to take immediate action. When we began to discuss the fact the grizzly bear has been designated as *Threatened* in Alberta, we were again impressed by how they understood the impact humans have on the environment, how we continue to contribute to grizzly bear decline in the province, and that grizzlies vitally need a safe and secure habitat where they can roam, forage for food, and raise their young. Even if the mother grizzly sleeps through the birth of a cub, her difficult job is just beginning and we should make it easier, not harder!

To really learn and appreciate the natural world, one must experience it firsthand. This was evident as we heard these children draw examples from their own experiences with wilderness and wildlife, some occurring as close as their own backyards. But the landscape in which Banded Peak Elementary School is situated does not resemble that of most schools in your average suburban community and, although the concept of "environmental education" is integrated into the Alberta curriculum, there are no actual requirements for classrooms to participate in hands-on, outdoor education programs. A variety of programs exist that seek to bridge the gap in environmental understanding and education between the highly modified and controlled environment of most classrooms and the inspiring wilderness areas of Alberta. But the impetus to incorporate experience into learning relies upon the initiatives of individual teachers. Without mandatory provisions for outdoor educational activities within elementary curriculum, the existing opportunities may be overlooked because of the long list of subjects teachers must cover. We do elementary students a disservice by continuing to undervalue these necessary opportunities for growth and learning. The roots of conservation values, and the route to future preservation of wild spaces, may begin by encouraging and allowing for the development of a personal relationship with the environments in which we live. What better place to do that than in elementary classrooms.



AWA's Madeline Wilson and Nigel Douglas talk grizzlies to kids from Banded Peak School
PHOTO: © S. MASIUK

A Note from Nigel

In the end, the Great Growling Grizzlies decided to make their own grizzly bear poster and to write letters to the new Premier Alison Redford. They wanted to tell her how much they love grizzly bears and how important it is to protect bears and the places they live.

There are times when it can be frustrating working in the environmental field in Alberta, particularly when dealing with government inaction in the face of disappearing wildlife populations. But listening to kids like the

Great Growling Grizzlies filled us with a renewed sense of optimism. They chatted knowledgeably about bears and the places they live and were bursting with enthusiasm to find out what they could do to support bears. If adults (politicians) will listen to the future then that mother grizzly and her cubs may well emerge to see a brighter horizon in Alberta. The children from Banded Peak might not have a vote yet, but they can write letters and they have a voice. And... they sure can grow! 🐾

