

Why are grizzlies getting hit by trains? Survey says...

Trains are the leading killer of grizzly bears in Banff and Yoho National Parks. An estimated 17 bears have been struck and killed since the year 2000. This is a significant number given that population estimates suggest there are only approximately 60 bears in the region. Trains don't only kill grizzlies either: countless other wildlife are victims too. Four wolf pups, for example, were killed last summer.

Canadian Pacific Railroad and Parks Canada started a five-year project in 2010 to understand and address the root causes of bear deaths on the tracks. The results and commitments to take action were announced at a press conference earlier this year.

The research highlighted commonly held knowledge that the railway tracks are attractive to bears and other wildlife for a number of reasons. For starters, travel is made easier on flat and cleared corridors. These cleared paths also provide the perfect conditions for bear food such as buffaloberries and dandelions which flourish in the sunlight. To

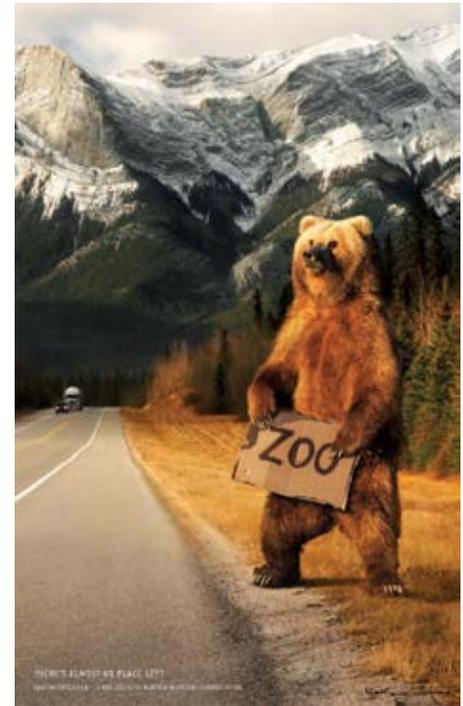
combat these attractants, Parks Canada has committed to using prescribed burns to create alternative suitable habitat away from the tracks and to clear edible vegetation away from the tracks.

Another complicating factor to bear-train collisions is the location of the tracks. Bears are more readily able to flee trains when the trains are easy to hear and the bears have clear lines of visibility. But in the parks there are a couple of notable pinch points where there are steep slopes without clear escape routes and where train noise echoes in the valleys and confuses the bears as to where the sound is coming from. Early warning signals, clearing pinch points, and fencing off high risk areas were all suggested strategies to help reduce deaths related to this cause.

While it's encouraging to see these research-inspired commitments to try to reduce bear mortalities on train tracks in Banff and Yoho National Park, the conference failed – or neglected – to address a vital issue: grain spillage.

Many papers noted that grain contributed

to grizzly deaths. One study found that an average of 110 tons of grain is spilled annually; this is equivalent to leaving open nearly 1 1/2 hopper cars full of grain for animals to scavenge. Obviously, not all of the spilled



If even our protected areas don't keep grizzlies safe, where do they have left? PHOTO: © AWA

grain is available for bears. Some of it is scattered very sparsely and/or is consumed by other animals. Still, grain could be a major supplement to the diets of grizzlies in a relatively unproductive landscape such as our mountain parks. In fact, this amount of spilled grain is enough to meet the annual nutritional needs of 50 grizzlies.

What makes this situation even more threatening to the bears is the seasonal availability of grain spills. Grain along the tracks is highest in the fall, when shipping rates are high, and in the spring when snowmelt reveals all the grain accumulated throughout the winter. This also coincides with the times when bears are most food stressed, leading up to and immediately following hi-

bernation. The peak seasons for bear mortality – spring and fall – are the seasons when the most grain is available.

And yet, there was no mention of any commitments on the part of Canadian Pacific to address the ongoing grain issue. Instead, the response seemed to be that there wasn't a need to act since grain spillage isn't the only, or the most significant, contributing factor to grizzly deaths.

This type of response ignores the fact that grain spillages play a role. Also, it ignores the fact that no study conclusively proved that grain wasn't an important factor. Spilled grain's place in the diets of other wildlife including squirrels, deer, and moose makes the train tracks an attractive spot for bears to find

prey and to scavenge other killed wildlife. One study highlighted that squirrel density was significantly higher near the tracks and that middens near the tracks were packed with grain – creating yet another attractant. Working to improve bear movement and habitat but neglecting to address the amount of grain spilled is counterintuitive. It's like saying exercise without a healthy diet will result in good health outcomes.

This whole story reads like an episode of Family Feud where a contestant loses the round because everyone failed to mention a glaringly obvious answer. In this case, our contestant is the grizzly. Let's hope they don't lose this round.

- Joanna Skrajny
