

# In Memoriam



**Charlie Russell,**  
August 19, 1941 – May 7, 2018

In May our world lost Charlie Russell, one of the great champions of grizzly bears and wilderness. Russell passed away in Calgary due to complications following surgery. I never had the opportunity to meet Charlie Russell so these few words are not born out of friendship. They come instead from the respect I have for Russell's outlook on the world and our place in it. That outlook, as shown through his research on grizzly bears, stressed the values of humility and trust.

Russell's work on grizzly bears reached a worldwide audience, not least because it was featured in two television documentaries: BBC Natural World's *The Bear Man of Kamchatka* and PBS Nature's *Walking with Giants: The Grizzlies of Siberia*. With Maureen Enns, Russell wrote several books about their experiences with grizzlies in Kamchatka (most notably *Grizzly Heart: Living Without Fear Among the Grizzly Bears of Kamchatka*). Those collaborations followed his first book, *Spirit Bear: Encounters with the White Bear of the Western Rainforest*, a book in part about Russell's efforts to establish a relationship of mutual trust with the Kermode, or spirit, bear on Princess Royal Island.

Russell's belief that bears are intelligent creatures capable of establishing relationships of trust with our species made his research noteworthy and controversial. It's a belief that challenged conventional wisdom and bear management practices. If we better understood bears, then we wouldn't need to fear

them and let our fear guide bear management. Kamchatka offered an ideal setting for Russell to test that belief since the peninsula's grizzly population was plentiful and quite isolated from human contact. Kamchatka's bears had not learned to fear humans. The Kamchatka experiences of Russell and Enns in the 1990s also demonstrated that it was possible to raise orphan grizzly cubs and return them successfully to the wild. Their success remains one that politicians in Alberta and elsewhere refuse to acknowledge and implement.

When Louisa Wilcox interviewed Russell in 2016 for "The Grizzly Times Podcast" she noted that many people liked to call Russell a "bear whisperer." Russell didn't think the label applied to him; his first reaction to that suggestion was that he was just a person who liked bears, and had liked them for a very long time.

Later in that interview Russell offered more insight into why he didn't see himself as a bear whisperer. That insight shone a light onto his humility. Louisa Wilcox asked him for his reflections on their friend Timothy Treadwell, someone who reportedly gloried in being called a bear whisperer. Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard were mauled and killed by a grizzly bear in Alaska's Katmai National Park in 2003 (Treadwell was the subject of the Werner Herzog documentary *The Grizzly Man*). Russell felt that Treadwell's knowledge about bears bred a false sense of security. Treadwell felt he was immune to harm from bears. Unlike Treadwell, Russell was never blinded to the possibility that he would encounter bears that could harm him. Russell rejected the dangerous, possibly life-threatening, sense of immunity and hubris that comes with seeing yourself as a bear whisperer. It was why Russell carried bear spray and recommended that anyone in bear country, especially in places where we have taught bears not to like people, should carry bear spray too.

Not surprisingly, the humility characterizing Russell's view of his relationship to indi-

vidual bears also animated his larger world view. Our species needs to be much more humble about our place in the world. For the decade he spent in Kamchatka Russell lived a schizophrenic existence. In order to return each year to the natural beauty of Kamchatka and its bears he had to raise money in our "weird world" where "we seem to think that we can live despite nature."

The bears and his experiences in Kamchatka taught him then about much more than bear behaviour. They taught him about the essence of what our brand of civilization demands. He may have put this best when Wilcox asked him a question about delisting grizzly bears as an endangered species in the lower 48 states of the U.S. He hoped grizzlies wouldn't be delisted because:

*part of the problem that we are in is that we think we are so separate from nature that we can just kill animals. We can just do what we want to do – and we chose an economic model that requires continuous growth. There is nothing like that in nature. Nature just doesn't provide a situation where we can do that forever. So, it has put us in a place where we always have to be looking at profits.*

Russell's outlook on relationships was one that, whether at the level of individuals or species, demands what the German sociologist Max Weber called an "ethic of responsibility." This ethic asks that we be aware of our responsibility to others (including other species) for the consequences of our conduct. Society today needs this ethic as much as it ever has and will miss dearly Charlie Russell – one of its champions.

- Ian Urquhart

For a touching tribute to Charlie Russell from many who were privileged to call him their friend please see the commemoration to his life held during the 2018 Waterton Wildflower Festival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YldHgZLSHpo>