

Bear in Mind...the Message is Out

Submitted by Leonard Sielecki, Wildlife and Environmental Issues Specialist / Photos by Crystal Wheeler, Environmental Roadside Manager



A "bear jam" is a hazard for bears and humans alike.

People come from all over the world to enjoy the natural beauty of British Columbia. For those travelling from heavily urbanized countries, seeing any species of wildlife is often a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The Sea-to-Sky Highway (Highway 99) offers international visitors in Vancouver the opportunity to easily access Whistler, one of the world's most famous and popular vacation destinations. From Squamish to Whistler, the Sea-to-Sky Highway corridor passes through spectacular scenery, and near the habitat of a growing number of black bears.

Nothing stops traffic like a bear, especially a mother bear with her cubs. Consequently, "bear jams" can be problematic for motorists. The situation becomes even more challenging when tourists, who are unfamiliar with North American wildlife, leave their vehicles to observe and photograph bears along the highway.

Early in the spring, the ministry was approached by Get Bear Smart Society Executive Director Sylvia Dolson and Bear Aware Community Coordinator Meg Toom (District of Squamish), to see if steps could be taken to protect bears and motorists along the Sea-to-Sky Highway corridor. Both Sylvia and Meg have been instrumental in raising bear awareness among people who live in the area, from Squamish to Whistler. In 2010, as a result of their efforts, the District of Squamish was the second community in the province to receive Bear Smart Accreditation from the Ministry of Environment (MoE).

The Bear Smart Community program is a voluntary, preventative conservation program, developed by MoE in partnership with the British Columbia Conservation Foundation and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, to reduce conflicts between humans and bears.

At meetings organized by Sylvia, Meg and Get Bear Smart Society Project Coordinator Dawn Johnson, I discussed the situation with Miller Capilano Maintenance Operations Manager Larry Paradis. We also met with representatives

[Continued on Page 7...](#)



Get Bear Smart Society Executive Director Sylvia Dolson and Squamish District Bear Aware Community Coordinator Meg Toom wear "bear warning" T-shirts custom designed by the ministry.

Bear in Mind...the Message is Out ...Continued from Page 6

of the Squamish First Nation, RCMP and British Columbia Conservation Officer Service, to brainstorm ways to protect the bears between Squamish and Whistler. Following the meetings, I kept in close contact with Sylvia, Meg, Dawn and Larry. On a daily basis, over the course of the summer, Sylvia, Dawn and Meg kept the ministry posted on where bears were being seen along the Sea-to-Sky Highway and Callaghan Road corridors. They also reported on "bear jam" locations, where large numbers of vehicles were stopping along the highway so motorists could observe bears. Ministry Environmental Roadside Manager Crystal Wheeler has been assessing the characteristics of the highway and the land around it, to help the ministry to understand this situation better.



Nothing stops traffic like a bear, especially a mother bear with cubs.

In the meantime, drawing inspiration from a "mother bear and cub" warning sign developed by the California Department of Transportation, Senior Traffic Engineer Jerry Froese and Sign Technologist Brian Lloyd designed an impressive new bear warning sign for the ministry. The signs were designed to be folded closed, to hide their message, when not needed. They can be opened from early spring to late fall – the time when MoE Large Carnivore Specialist Tony Hamilton says bears are usually active along the Sea-to-Sky Highway and Callaghan Road areas. By closing the signs in the winter when bears are hibernating, the messages hold their relevance for motorists, when the warnings are needed.

While the signs are intended to let motorists know about the potential for bears along the Sea-to-Sky Highway corridor, special

"Do Not Feed Bears" tabs are included to discourage motorists from feeding bears. In British Columbia, feeding wildlife is illegal, and offenders can be fined up to \$100,000.

While most bears tend to avoid humans, bears are opportunistic creatures when food is concerned. Upon waking from a long winter's hibernation, a bear's first instinct is to look for food. Unfortunately, when bears are fed, they become accustomed to humans. These bears may allow people to approach more closely than a wary bear would. Bears that become too habituated to humans are often wrongly perceived as "tame". This can lead to a tourist approaching a bear too closely, and then being injured or killed when the bear feels threatened. Feeding bears along highways also encourages the bears to remain nearby. This places bears at greater risk of injury or death, if they are struck by motor vehicles.

Five sets of bear warning signs were produced by Sherine Industries Ltd., in Surrey, and shipped to Squamish. Working closely with Miller Capilano Maintenance Corporation staff, Squamish Area Manager Jesse Morwood arranged for the installation of the bear warning signs.

Three signs were recently installed along the Sea-to-Sky Highway. The other two are located along Callaghan Road en route to Whistler Olympic Park. The signs were installed in time to warn motorists about any bears still roaming in the area, before the onset of winter and bear hibernation. Even with the bear warning signs in place, the ministry continues to explore strategies and opportunities for protecting both bears and motorists, along the Squamish to Whistler corridor. ♦

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