



LIFE20 NAT/NL/001107
LIFE Bear-Smart Corridors

Lessons learnt from the visit to the BSCs in
British Columbia
Action A2



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Dara Brodey – Rewilding Apennines

1. INTRODUCTION

Setting

The present report was produced in the frame of Action A2 of the LIFE Bear Smart Corridors project. The purpose of the action is to increase among the beneficiaries the knowledge regarding Bear Smart Communities in Canada, to get a first-hand perspective on the challenges, history, motives, structure, trajectories, and relationships between stakeholders, that play a role in the oldest Bear Smart Community projects in the world.

With this first-hand experience, participants can learn from the experience and the mistakes or take inspiration to adapt different ideas to their local social, economic, cultural and environmental context, and take up the challenges of human-bear coexistence within the LIFE BSC project.

Scope of the analysis

This analysis aims at giving an overview of the trip and of the lessons learnt.

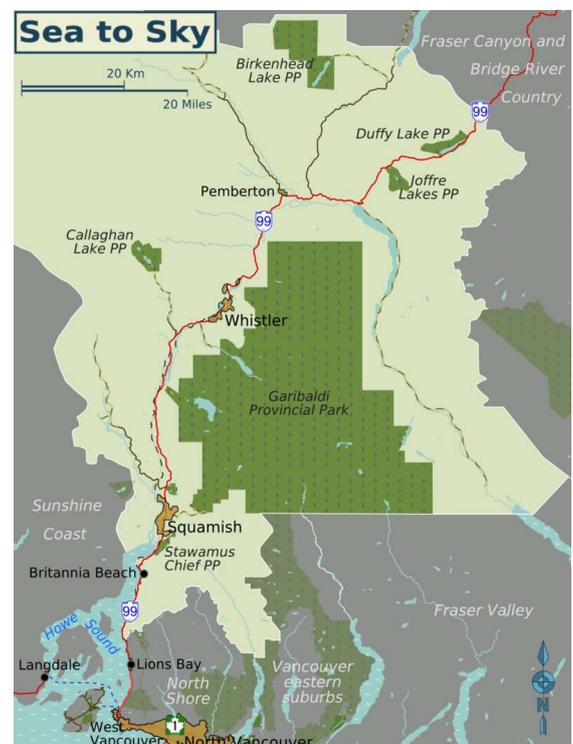
Background information

In North America, every year, hundreds of bears are put down, as a solution to human-bear conflicts. The Bear Smart Community programme was created, at the provincial level, as a voluntary programme for municipalities in Canada. It followed the efforts and dedicated work of people who understood that conflicts – and therefore the destruction of bears – can be avoided by changing the way humans behave. The BSC programme was designed by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, the British Columbia Conservation Foundation and the Union of the British Columbia Municipalities. It is a “voluntary, preventive conservation measure that encourages communities, businesses and individuals to work together”.

As most human-bear conflicts arise when humans let bears access non-natural food, like garbage, one of the main objectives of the Bear Smart Communities is to effectively manage attractants creating threats for bears and danger for humans or their property. For the programme to be successful, both the public and the policymakers alike need to be educated and actively involved.

- Timing

The trip took place between September 18th and 29th. It included visits to five towns in the Sea to Sky corridor in British Columbia, Canada: the District of North Vancouver, Lions Bay, Squamish, Whistler and Pemberton. Of these, Whistler, Squamish and Lions Bay hold the title of Bear Smart Community. Pemberton and North Vancouver offer interesting examples of coexistence strategies carried out by local organisations.



2. METHODS

The trip was planned to acquire knowledge both from meetings and discussions and from first-hand experience in the BSCs.

Two positive effects of the trip were the opportunity to network with Canadian organisations, institutions and individuals working in this field and the opportunity to build a stronger team among LIFE project partners and share opinions.

3. ITINERARY AND LOCAL CONTEXT

The towns that we visited are very different in terms of capacity and setting. Here follows a brief presentation of each town, the organisations we met and the programmes we learned about.

The District of North Vancouver is a district municipality in the Metro Vancouver area. Here, we met with the North Shore Black Bear Society, an organisation that mostly works on education. They also answer bear-alert calls when a black bear visits an area and advise people in the neighbourhood regarding what to do and how to behave. The NSBBS also operates in the City of North Vancouver and in West Vancouver. Although these municipalities are not BSCs, local organisations like the NSBBS and the authorities cooperate to support human-bear coexistence. For example, they share data on bear sightings and local bylaw officers ensure that attractants are properly managed by residents, applying the bylaws.

Lions Bay is a small-town of 1390 inhabitants on the Sea to Sky Highway. It was awarded its Bear Smart status in 2011. Being a small town between the coast and the mountains, its residents carried out efforts since the 00's to save their bears from conflicts leading to their destruction by the Conservation Officer Service. Today, one of the biggest challenges for Lions Bay is to educate many new residents looking for a home away from the cities (following the outbreak of Covid) and teach them how to manage waste and other attractants. Unlike other towns that we visited, Lions Bay's BSC representatives are all volunteers.

Squamish is a fast-growing town and as of today it counts around 23,000 people. Apart from attracting new permanent residents, every year, many tourists visit the town and surrounding mountains for outdoor recreation. Spreading awareness about BSC practices among newcomers is therefore one of the biggest challenges for the community. In Squamish we visited the local dump, a salmon breeding centre for conservation purposes, and we enjoyed a productive meeting with seven town employees involved in the BSC programme.

In Squamish, the low budget does not allow for new resources for a separate BSC committee or office, but their collaborative approach means that each department collaborates to keep the Bear Smart Programme working and improving. The BSC has an Official Community Plan, containing general guidelines for long-term development. The Official Community Plan is drawn up in collaboration with the surrounding protected areas and it is a very practical plan, rather than a theoretical one.

The last BSC that we visited was Whistler. Whistler is the first Bear Smart Community in America and the pioneering Get Bear Smart Society, led by Sylvia Dolson, was based here since it started its work in human-bear coexistence more than two decades ago. Whistler is surrounded by mountains and is a famous Resort Town for winter sports, although it attracts tourists year-round (over two million a year).

In Whistler, we met with Heather Beresford who has dedicated her career to human-bear coexistence and works for the municipality of Whistler, and Ashley Dowling, the Bear Smart Programme Assistant. We also met with two representatives of the Conservation Officer Services who provide public safety, enforce natural resource law, and prevent or respond to human wildlife conflicts.

Pemberton is a town in the Northern part of the Sea to Sky Corridor, 150km away from Vancouver. Pemberton Meadows is an area of farms and agriculture near the town. Together with Coast to

Cascades – Grizzly Bear Initiative and The Grizzly Bear Foundation, we visited the Van Loons’ farm to understand their efforts to promote coexistence with grizzly bears, especially through the installation of electric fences to protect crops.

4. LESSONS LEARNT

The Canadian Bear Smart Communities are the (ongoing) result of a cooperative effort by several parties, institutional and non-institutional, who work towards human-bear coexistence. In Canada, the tangible result of successful coexistence and aim of the programme is to reduce the number of bears that are put down every year because of human-related causes.

There are two main differences with the European context of the LIFE Bear Smart Corridor partners.

Firstly, in Italy and Greece, the total number of bears is not as high as in Canada – less than one hundred in Italy and a few hundred in Greece, versus twenty-five thousand grizzlies and almost four hundred thousand black bears in Canada. In the Apennines especially, the survival of the Marsican subspecies is inextricably intertwined with the survival of each individual and its genetic contribution.

On the one hand, this means that conservation efforts cannot dare to risk the life of any individual bear, with consequences on strategic decisions; on the other, the uniqueness and importance of the European sub-populations and sub-species can attract more attention from the public, which can be redirected towards creating awareness programmes, eco-friendly tourism and businesses.

The second difference is that in many towns of the LIFE project, the measures that are implemented are completely preventive. While this gives the necessary time and space for strategic action to support the expanding bear population, on the other side it constitutes a challenge: in many towns, people are not used to living with bears anymore. Several generations have forgotten what it means to live in a land that supports thriving wildlife, among which, bears. Getting people involved, especially if they have a strong sense of human ownership over the landscape they live in, can be a complicated endeavour. But it is needed.

Another lesson taught by our Canadian colleagues is the importance of everybody’s involvement. Coexistence works if everybody participates. In Whistler, for example, there are bear-proof bins in the whole municipality. There are recycling bins and general waste bins in the streets of the town. And on every single bin there are stickers with information: how to use the bins, “why” this bin, who to call if the bin is full. Residents and tourists are forced to use bear-proof bins (there simply aren’t any other kind of bins) and are also “fed” with bear-education. In Squamish, the bylaw officers explained to us that the enforcement of private waste bylaws is not only based on fines, but also on education: before fining someone, who doesn’t secure their attractants, the bylaw officers visit them two or three times, during which first they educate them about waste, food or fruit tree management, then they give a verbal or written warning and finally they fine them.

Education is also carried out through different year-round programmes targeting both children and adults. In Squamish, the bylaw officers employ a person every year to create education programmes. In Whistler, the Bear Smart Program Assistant visits the schools. In Vancouver the NSBBS organises workshops for schools and leisurely private occasions like family barbecues to teach about bear biology and behaviour, signs of presence and what to do in case of bear encounter. Respect for bears comes from knowing them.

But not all attempts to involve citizens turn out successful (yet). In Whistler, a programme was started to involve hospitality business owners and staff in managing food waste correctly. However, the challenge is still up. One of the main problems is that there is a high staff turnover, as every year, seasonal workers temporarily move to Whistler to work. If you enter your regular restaurant in Whistler this winter, you might not find any of the same staff that was serving you your favourite Poutine last year. The staff is mostly not part of the community and the owners do not focus on bear issues, not even if their used oil were attracting black bears from outside town. The Whistler Bear Smart Programme Assistant has tried meeting in person with owners and staff,

but whenever a constructive relationship is created, it is brought to zero at the end of the season. This resembles the situation in the tourist resort towns in the Apennines, where many workers are temporary residents.

Building a relationship with local communities is a long-term commitment, a process that requires time and being present, it requires talking with people. Lasting and quality relationships are key support to any coexistence programme.

While the BSC in the small town of Lions Bay runs on volunteers (even if, at the time of our visit, two representatives happened to be in the Council), Squamish and Whistler heavily count on administration to continue their BSC mandate. In these towns, the institutions' involvement is crucial in the development and continuation of the programme. Bylaws are one of the most important tools to inculcate proper waste management in residents and tourists, and waste is the focal point of the BSCs in America.

Bylaws are produced by the municipality and enforced by bylaw officers. Bylaw officers, while they answer calls regarding a variety of subjects and have the power to give fines, also have the role of educating the public about the existence and meaning of the bylaws.

Another factor supporting the programme is funding. Funding for the BSCs comes from the State. Even some associations that are not in the BSC get funding from their municipality, like the NSBBS. Although this is a form of stability for the programme, some representatives of the BSCs stated that the funds are not enough to do everything that could be useful for the programme, and that they need to renegotiate the amount of funds allocated to the BSC programme every time the town budget is defined.

In Italy and Greece, there are no bylaws regarding bear-proof garbage cans and bear-attractant management. Italian and Greek NGOs and conservation organisations are also used to limited attention on the part of the regional and municipal authorities towards coexistence matters. A question is: will it be possible one day to directly involve local governments in the creation of *ad hoc* bylaws? Can the Italian and Greek municipalities also demand from the waste companies to be responsible for implementing bear-proof measures (like in Squamish, for example)? What are otherwise the most effective ways of involving citizens in managing waste?

Pemberton was a very interesting example, different from all other towns we visited: it dealt with a rural setting in an area of grizzly bear comeback.

In Pemberton, at the Van Loons' farm, we saw the electric fences installed to protect crops – potatoes, carrots, etc. Grizzlies were not perceived as a danger to cattle: Marty Van Loon, the farm owner, told us about the times he had seen grizzly bears graze in the field together with his cows. Devin Pawluk and Jolene Patrick from C2C told us that it was important to first get at least one family of farmers involved, as a positive example and influence on other more sceptical farmers living in the valley. The grizzly bears are slowly making their way back into the valley: we were lucky to be in Steve Rochetta's company during our visit and learn more about his decennial studies on the local grizzly populations, based on camera trapping and DNA samplings.

There is a striking similarity between the area around Pemberton and the wildlife corridors in the Apennines: the people living in these regions are not used to living with grizzly or brown bears anymore; the work carried out by local organisations focusses therefore on developing practical tools for coexistence, promoting acceptance and improve the understanding of the importance of these endangered population of bears.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The whole Bear Smart Community programme started from the joint efforts of passionate citizens, who were able to influence politics at the provincial level to make them work with local municipalities, who in turn educated and involved local citizens, in a virtuous circle based on funding, citizens/government awareness, urban planning and law enforcement: this is profoundly inspiring and gives us solid elements to believe in the work we are doing to create self-sustaining and dynamic systems for human-bear coexistence.