The Bear Book
Volume II
The Bear Book Volume II

A Bear Trust International Conservation Education Publication

Edited by Dr. Melissa Reynolds-Hogland

Published by Bear Trust International 2015

Photo credits on book cover:  Sun Bear; Jocelyn Stokes
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BROWN BEAR

The Spirit of Kodiak

By Larry Van Daele

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“You are a dealer of death! How can you sleep at night realizing that you are responsible for the destruction of God’s most magnificent creatures? You, sir, can be assured that your day of reckoning will come and you will be judged harshly for your actions!”

Wow. That was an interesting way to start another day as the Wildlife Biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game on Kodiak Island. The caller was unusually upset that we allow bears to be killed on Kodiak, however, her passionate interest in conserving Kodiak bears was typical of what I’ve heard over the last quarter century I’ve worked with these animals. It seems that Kodiak bears evoke strong emotions in just about everyone who learns about them. Our Department’s charge is to find ways to not only make sure the bear populations are healthy, but also strive to satisfy the diverse interests of people – this is rarely an easy assignment.
The Gulfstream V split the glistening sheen on the tarmac as it touched down on rain-soaked runway 25 on Kodiak. Inside, the corporate executives were as giddy as schoolboys as they anticipated the hunt of a lifetime. They’d been hunting for trophy animals around the world, but finally they had been able to secure a couple of the highly coveted permits to pursue a bear on Kodiak. As the private jet taxied to the terminal the hunting partners bantered back and forth about how almost 1 in 10 of the bears taken on Kodiak each year make the Boone and Crockett record book and 8 of the top 10 brown bears ever taken in North America have come from this island. Now it was their turn to test themselves against these magnificent creatures.

In the early part of the 20th century it became evident that the bears inhabiting the Kodiak Archipelago were the largest in North America and perhaps in the world. Biologists classified them as a separate subspecies, *Ursus arctos middendorffi*, because of their large size and the fact that they had been isolated from other bear populations for at least 12,000 years. Unfortunately, the bear population had been severely depleted by that time primarily because of market hunting and wanton shooting by people who considered them predators on salmon and cattle. In 1904, James H. Kidder wrote one of the first accounts of hunting Kodiak bears and noted: “…most people have an exaggerated idea of the number of bears on the Kadiak (sic) Islands. Personally I believe that they are too few ever to make shooting them popular.”

During that time, the country’s game laws were tangled, contradictory, and often unenforceable. In 1887, the first American wildlife conservation organization was formed when several influential hunters, scientists, and military and political leaders initiated the Boone & Crockett Club. Their efforts led to the first federal legislation to enforce wildlife regulations and
the interstate traffic of illegally taken animals. The Game and Wild Bird Preservation and Disposition Act of 1900, also known as the Lacey Act, set the foundation for the first legal protection for much of America’s wildlife, including Kodiak’s bears. The cause of wildlife conservation was also pushed to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness by the first president of the new century, Theodore Roosevelt, another of the Boone & Crockett Club’s founders.

In 1925 the newly established the Alaska Game Commission outlawed the sale of Kodiak bear hides and set the first limits on how bears could be harvested. As bear populations rebounded, sport hunting started to become an economic opportunity. A few enterprising entrepreneurs seized that opportunity to become the first professional Kodiak bear guides, and they also became strong advocates for the bears themselves.

In the late 1930s, cattle ranchers and fishermen were convinced that the bear population was out of control and should be drastically reduced. Guides and other sportsmen disagreed and took their arguments to territorial and federal law makers. The end result of the controversy was establishment of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge in 1941. Almost two-thirds of Kodiak Island was set aside as critical bear habitat and Refuge managers were charged with finding ways that the population could be sustained while allowing limited bear hunting. The rest of the island, including a one-mile strip around the coastline, was left open to homesteading, ranching, salmon canneries, and other human activities.

Conflicts continued for the next couple decades, with calls for bear control by vocal and well-organized representatives of cattlemen and canneries. Sportsmen countered these recommendations vehemently. A 1953 Field and Stream article said, “Conservationists and sportsmen all over America, aroused by the Kodiak threat, have joined battle in the bear’s defense”. An article in the Saturday Evening Post in 1955 noted “unless the
species is given continued protection, the conservationists warn, America’s most majestic wildlife creature could be wiped out in a few short years. The trouble is . . . that the big bears don’t have a lobby in Washington. Surely a nation as big as ours can afford a few acres of real estate . . . so that this historic creature will not go the way of the mastodon and the hairy mammoth, and disappear from the face of the earth”. As a result, bear control was never initiated, bear hunting regulations became more restrictive, and the one-mile coastal strip intended for human development was rescinded and became part of the Refuge.

When Alaska achieved statehood in 1959, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game took over responsibility of managing Kodiak bears. We adopted most of the same regulations the Federal government imposed and implemented more restrictive rules on some parts of the archipelago. On northeastern Kodiak (outside of the Refuge), however, the cattlemen found a sympathetic ear in the newly established legislature and bear control was initiated with Fish and Game staff directed to actively hunt and kill bears near ranches.

Once again, sportsmen did not hesitate to make their voices heard in support of Kodiak brown bears. The most vociferous condemnation of the predator-control program came in a 1964 article in Outdoor Life titled “The Kodiak Bear War”. A group of Kodiak guides sent a telegram to the editor requesting that the magazine present the facts to the public. In its exposé, the magazine disclosed a “secret” state-sanctioned program that started in 1962 and employed the use of two World War II fighter pilots to shoot bears from the air. The Piper Super Cub aircraft with a semi-automatic M-1 Garand rifle mounted above the cockpit was prominently displayed on the magazine’s cover. Unrelenting pressure finally terminated the controversial program in 1970.
The wind whistled through the fiberglass roofing of the bear sealing shed as I crouched over the luxurious dark brown hide of the recently killed adult boar. It was a not trophy-class, but definitely a nice hide. Most hunters are intensely interested in the size of their bear’s skull, its age and the quality of the hide, and they usually pepper us with questions as we work our way through the mandatory inspection and sealing process before the hunter can take his trophy from the island. But this hunter just wanted to talk about the gall bladder. He wanted to know if he had prepared it properly. “I took it out of the bear as soon as it was dead and I made sure the bile stayed inside”, he told me in a quiet and somber tone. “Then I smoked it over an alder fire – would you check to make sure it is dried enough?”

I looked it over carefully, told him it looked fine to me, but admitted that I was not an expert on gall bladder preparation. My curiosity piqued, I then inquired why this particular part of the bear was his “trophy”. He lowered his eyes and said, “My father has terminal liver cancer and the doctors said there was nothing they could do for him. But I found a Chinese doctor who told me that if I could get a fresh brown bear gall bladder he could cure him. I used my life’s savings to go on this hunt and I don’t want to screw things up. I have to do everything I can to save Dad.”

Due to the efforts of sportsmen, guys like this gentleman, as well as the corporate executives and the average Alaska resident, still have an opportunity to pursue Kodiak bears. While battles ensued over whether bears should be conserved or eradicated, biologists were working to unlock the secrets of the bears’ lives and find ways to manage them. By using modern radio-telemetry techniques and old-fashioned observation, we have learned where bears go during the year, what they eat, where they den, and how they
interact. We’ve also discovered ways to determine how long they live, how many cubs they have, and how many bears there are in each part of the islands. These findings, coupled with common-sense advice from guides and other hunters, have resulted in a finely tuned management system that distributes hunters in 32 different areas during two seasons (spring: April 1 – May 15, and fall: October 25 – November 30).

Each year about 4,500 people apply for the 496 permits we offer for Kodiak bear hunts (two-thirds to Alaska residents, one-third to nonresidents). Nonresidents are required to hire a registered guide who is authorized to hunt in a particular area, and this can cost from $10,000 - $22,000. All hunters must come into our office in Kodiak prior to going into the field for a brief orientation and must check out before they leave the island. Few hunters complain about the expense or inconvenience, though, because they realize that the chance to hunt a Kodiak bear is a unique opportunity.

The consequence of all this cooperation between hunters and biologists is a bear population that is probably as high as it has ever been. We estimate that there are 3,500 bears on the archipelago and the population is continuing to increase slightly each year. Just as important, we have seen an increasing number and percentage of large, trophy-sized boars (total skull size at least 28”) taken in recent years. For instance, in the 1970s around 2.5% of the bears killed on Kodiak were trophy-sized; in the 1990s and 2000s the proportion increased to roughly 9%.

You could feel the tension in the air. Even the raucous gulls seemed to fall silent as the massive boar parted the tall grass along the shore and entered Frazer River. The subadults and family groups that had enjoyed a bounty of thousands of sockeye salmon struggling upriver to spawn moved aside as the half-ton monarch sauntered to a favored spot. Less than 30 yards away, a group of ten people instinctively huddled a little closer
together. They had come from Kodiak a couple hours earlier to watch and photograph bears, and had been thrilled by the interactions and antics of a couple dozen bruins, including a sow who nursed her cubs right next to them. Yet this was different, and for the first time in their lives they were not the masters of their environment – they were as much a part of it as the salmon, the birds and the other bears, and deep in their souls they could sense their place in this drama.

Hunters are no longer the only group interested in Kodiak bears. In the past 20 years bear viewing has become increasing popular on Kodiak and other parts of Alaska. This diversification is due in part to a national trend of increasing interest in wildlife watching, and here in southern Alaska it has been accelerated by press coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill that highlighted the beauty of our area, and by fishing and hunting lodges who are striving to extend their seasons and client base. The most accessible bear viewing location on Kodiak, Frazer River, now has over 1,100 people who come each year, paying $450 each for a 3-hour tour. Visitor numbers have been increasing at about 10% annually and there are plans for development of additional bear viewing areas on the archipelago.

Although bear viewing is often touted as a “non-consumptive” use, it can have serious impacts on bear populations if it is not conducted properly. Most viewing occurs at places where bears congregate. Bears are typically solitary animals, and the only reason they come together in large numbers is because of feeding opportunities that are critical to their survival. If some bears avoid these areas because people are there, those bears may not get the fat and protein they need to make it through the upcoming winter. So, while a hunter may make a “surgical strike” by stealthily harvesting a single bear, unmanaged bear viewing could impact several bears, especially productive sows with cubs.
Often times bear viewing and bear hunting are considered incompatible. Even if the bear population is healthy and bear hunting is sustainable, ethical questions arise especially if hunting occurs near viewing areas and either during or soon after the viewing season. Many feel that it is not fair to encourage bears to be close to people during the summer only to allow them to be shot in the fall.

Here on Kodiak we tried to address these problems with a public planning process. In 2002, a citizen’s advisory committee composed of representatives from 12 diverse stakeholder groups worked with our Department to develop the *Kodiak Archipelago Bear Conservation and Management Plan*. The plan included over 260 recommendations, but the most impressive aspect of it was that all of the recommendations were by consensus. Even though the stakeholders had very different philosophical positions, they were willing to work together and compromise for the good of the bears.

The Kodiak bear plan recognized bear hunting as a legitimate, traditional, and biologically justifiable activity. It also recommends that our Department and the Refuge find ways to make bear hunting and bear viewing compatible on the archipelago. Recognizing that this may be a challenging task, the citizen’s advisory committee decided to carry on its work even after the plan was completed. For the past 6 years they have continued to meet through the winter months to work with agency staff and each other. As a bear manager, this group has been a fantastic resource for conserving our valuable bear resource and to find ways to help people and bears co-exist.

*Taquka’aq is a powerful spirit. The Alutiiq people who first inhabited Kodiak over 7,500 years ago have traditions that view bear as a liaison between the spirit world and the physical world, in part because he spends half of the year in a dream state. Strict rituals surround how hunts can be*
conducted and how the meat, bones and hide must be cared for and distributed. If these rules are not followed carefully it is impossible to live in harmony with bears or yourself. The essential aspect of all dealings with Taquka’aq is: RESPECT.

Many things have happened to the Alutiiq people in the 250 years they have lived with western cultures. As they assimilated Russian, Scandinavian and American ways either by choice or by force they lost many of their traditions and much of their language. In recent years, however, there has been a revitalization of the culture as young people strive to resurrect the wisdom Elders passed on for millennia. Bears are once again being considered as an integral part of their lives and their being, rather than just being seen as a nuisance or a way to make money.

We too can learn from the wisdom of the Elders. Kodiak bears are not something to be eradicated, completely protected, or possessed by humans. They are the lifeblood and spirit of the Kodiak Islands, and as such need to be treated with respect. This holds true for the hunters who have been all over the world, the average guy who only has one shot at getting a Kodiak trophy, or the people who finally get in touch with the natural world by watching a bear in the wild. I am convinced that by learning as much as possible about the bears and the various people who care about them, we can find ways to share this gift with each other while being good stewards so that Kodiak bears continue to thrive for another 12,000 years or more. If we can do that, we can all be comfortable when we are asked about our role in dealing with “God’s most magnificent creatures” when our “day of reckoning” comes.

This story was first printed in Fair Chase during 2008 and reprinted here with permission from the author.