



Commercial Bear Viewing Association
of British Columbia

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Putting Best Practices in Context

This document reflects the experience of Commercial Bear Viewing Association of British Columbia (CBVA) member companies who, collectively, represent thousands of hours and many years of incident free, enjoyable and sustainable bear viewing in various regions of British Columbia. Our best practices document has also had key input from respected wildlife biologists. The practices found within this document are meant to be used in concert with any tenure or protocol agreements that have been signed by our members with government or First Nations as well as with any applicable provincial or federal laws.

Our best practices have evolved in an adaptive context. What does that mean? Basically it starts with the premise that we as operators desire to have as minimal an impact on bears as we can. Twenty years ago when some of our members pioneered this industry in B.C. there were no guidelines and very little research on how to safely view bears in the wild. These companies would try a technique or strategy designed for low impact viewing and if they saw a negative outcome (i.e., a stressed bear) they would modify their viewing behaviour and start again. Over many years of this adaptive viewing, our members have evolved techniques and strategies that we believe are highly effective. These techniques allow our members to offer guests a quality viewing experience while minimizing impact on the environment and the bears.

We as an association are committed to continuing to evolve our viewing techniques and strategies as new research and our experience dictates. We help to fund important, professional research on human-bear interactions. Some of this research has had surprising results. For example, research on viewing in Knight Inlet has led to data that suggests viewing actually may help the long-term viability of local populations. Data of Utah State University researcher Owen Nevin indicated that females with cubs may feel less stressed during feeding while in the presence of humans. This is thought to be because large male bears are less likely to intrude on female/cub feeding sessions when humans are present. This has led to important changes to bear viewing in Knight Inlet which allows viewers to watch females with cubs while at the same time allowing enough space and time for large male bears to get the nourishment they require. This is but one example of important on-going research that is key to the long-term viability of our bear viewing industry.

In BC we are fortunate to have grizzly bears, black bears, and Kermode (or Spirit) bears. These bears are wild, elusive, and highly intelligent. They are a symbol of our wilderness



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and are a touchstone for that mystical, timeless connection we have with the Earth. Our members and our guests witness a side to these animals that most of the public never see. Our guests are able to see bears going about the day-to-day work of living - mating, feeding, hunting, resting, playing, fighting, and learning. This makes us appreciate bears for what they are and makes wildlife viewing a remarkable and moving experience.

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Guide Training and Certification

Guide Training

CBVA member companies are expected to meet or exceed industry standards in staff training. Member companies should provide training to guides that address environmental awareness, human safety, appropriate response to accidents or emergencies, and safe, educational, and non-disruptive interactions with bears. The following are considered core skills of guides:

- Sensible approach to safety and good judgement.
- Local area knowledge.
- Technical skills such as boat handling, radio commercial operator competency, vehicle handling skills on rough terrain, group management on land.
- First aid training.
- Ability to carry out an emergency plan using available resources.
- Effective nature interpretation, communication and human management skills.
- Knowledge of bear biology and area ecology; conservation and management issues.
- Recognition of signs and signals of bear stress that can lead to the bear moving away, approaching aggressively, or even attacking.
- Prevention and safe response to bear encounters, approaches, or attacks.
- Period of apprenticeship with an experienced bear viewing guide.

Guide Certification

The CBVA requests that their member companies endeavour to hire only guides possessing certification by the CBVA. There are two levels of CBVA guide certification: “Assistant Guide” and “Full Guide”. Potential guides must first complete the assistant guide level endorsement before they will be considered for certification as a full guide.

Assistant Guide

The assistant guide endorsement is granted upon the successful completion of a CBVA assistant guide training course. The foundation of the 2-3 day assistant guide training course is a curriculum and CBVA *Bear Viewing Guide Training Resource Manual* developed by Grant MacHutchon as well as the CBVA *Best Practices Guidelines*.

The CBVA typically holds an assistant guide certification course each year dependent on demand. Individual companies and stakeholders can develop their own training programs that are appropriate to their type of operation using this 2-3 day program and curriculum as a foundation and by using a CBVA sanctioned instructor. Such training programs must be evaluated and approved by the CBVA Education and Certification Committee.



Full Guide

Full guide status can be attained by completing 60 days apprenticeship with a CBVA certified full guide. Candidates need to submit a cover letter, detailed logbook, and CBVA evaluation and recommendation form (signed by a certified guide) to the CBVA Education and Certification Committee. Logbooks should outline relevant experience including locations, dates, species of bear, types of viewing (e.g., boat-based, land-based, fixed site, roving, fixed structure, or fixed location), and companies worked for.

In some circumstances it may not be possible for an assistant guide to apprenticeship for 60 days under a CBVA certified full guide. For example, small companies primarily run by an owner/ operator may have a difficult time meeting the CBVA apprenticeship requirement or may not be able to provide an apprenticeship opportunity to any seasonal staff they employ. Consequently, a CBVA certified assistant guide may apply to the CBVA Education and Certification Committee for a waiver of the 60 day apprenticeship requirement during their full guide application. In order to be considered for full guide status under these circumstances, an applicant must demonstrate they meet a number of required and desirable criteria, as follows:

Required Criteria

- All or most of the core skills of a full guide (see section 2.1 above). These skills should be detailed in a cover letter as part of the application.
- At least 100 days of bear viewing guiding experience. This experience should be detailed in a logbook and include locations, dates, species of bear, type of viewing (e.g., boat-based, land-based, fixed site, roving, fixed structure, or fixed location), and companies worked for.
- A 1 to 2 day on-site evaluation of the applicant's guiding skills by one of the CBVA's guide instructors. This would be at the expense of the applicant or their employer and may include travel expenses and a consulting fee to the guide instructor (this should be negotiated independently with one of the guide instructors). The evaluating guide instructor would then provide the CBVA Education and Certification Committee with an independent assessment of the applicant's skill in the form of a letter and a signed evaluation and recommendation form.

Desirable Criteria

- Demonstrated guiding experience with more than one species of bear and with a range of viewing types (see the list above).
- Initiative to mentor with a full guide whenever possible, to visit and experience other bear viewing operations, and/ or effort to gain additional knowledge and experience about bear ecology and behaviour whenever possible.



Guest Relations and Education

The success of any bear viewing operation is enhanced by well-informed and respectful guests. This, in turn, requires effective education information and knowledgeable and conscientious staff. All operators will strive to add interpretative value to their trips. The education component in guided trips will be given strong weight. To this end, staff will not only possess high levels of knowledge of bear ecology but be skilled at imparting that knowledge to guests using the principles of nature interpretation.

Any information that guides can provide that increases people's understanding of bears can increase guest's appreciation and respect for bears. Guests are more likely to follow viewing guidelines if they understand the negative implications to bears and other wildlife of ignoring them.

In addition, member companies will strive to educate, where and when possible, other user groups, including private travellers and commercial bear viewing operators not part of the association, in the methods and philosophy of sustainable bear viewing. As such, the CBVA will strive to be ambassadors for the industry.

Guest Safety & Education Briefing

All bear viewing guests will be given a safety and education briefing that emphasizes the following points. Additional information will be provided to guests depending whether viewing is boat-based or land-based, as in sections 3.1.4 and 3.1.5

General Safety

- Guides will accompany guests during all outings.
- Guests are required to stay close to the guide at all times.
- Guests will be warned to dress warmly whenever venturing out, particularly when they may be occupying a viewing site away from camp for several hours.
- Guests will be encouraged to try to keep dry in cold and wet weather, particularly their underclothes and socks.
- The safety procedure should the guide or one of the guests be injured.

Safety around Bears

- What is food-conditioning in bears and why it is essential to minimize the chance bears will be exposed to human food, garbage or other attractants.
- When it is necessary to carry food and beverages for longer outings, the food and any resulting garbage will be packed in air-tight or bear-proof containers and be kept with the guide at all times.
- The expected action of guests when at viewing areas.



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- The potential risks associated with viewing bears at close range.
- The type of bear encounters guests should expect.
- The risk of an unwanted or unplanned bear encounter.
- How guests should behave during an unwanted bear encounter.
- The first line of defence in the event that something goes wrong.
- The emergency procedure should the guide or one of the guests be incapacitated by a bear.

Education

- An overview of local bear ecology.
- What are tolerance, human-habituation, and wariness in a bear.
- The importance of minimizing displacement of bears from important habitat.
- Why there are restrictions on movement to and within bear viewing areas.
- Noise and movement while viewing bears shall be kept to a minimum.
- Smoking is not permitted while viewing bears.
- Photographic flash devices are not permitted when viewing or photographing bears.
- Guests are not to signal to the bears in any way using hand motions or auditory signals.
- Bears may be affected by such things as strong smelling perfumes or deodorants so guests should avoid using them.

Boat-based Viewing

- Guests must wear Personal Flotation Devices (PFD's) at all times when in inflatable craft, small vessels, or kayaks.
- Operators will adhere to all current Ministry of Transport small vessel safety regulations", where a small vessel is defined as a vessel under 8 metres.

Land-based Viewing

- Guests must stay on established pathways and trails.
- Guests will be warned to stay alert and aware of conditions underfoot, as well as, hanging branches, rocks, logs and roots.

Risk Management

- Member companies must hold themselves to the highest standard of care and safety for guests and bears.
- Member companies will articulate a thorough emergency and contingency response plan and ensure their employees have appropriate training on its contents. Guests should be briefed to the level appropriate as outlined in section 3.1. The emergency response plan should include:
 - Protocol for using bear spray (e.g., how it is carried, types, capsaicin content, size, etc.).
 - First aid protocols. That is, level of training of staff, types of kits at camp and carried on outings, ancillary equipment available (e.g., spine boards, neck braces), procedures to record injuries and first aid administered, equipment maintenance.
 - Protocol for using communication devices (e.g., VHF radio, satellite phone, etc.).



- List of emergency contact numbers to be readily available to all staff and carried by each guide when on an outing.
- How guides and guests should behave during an unwanted bear encounter.
- How to report a bear that poses a risk to human safety, such as a food-conditioned, predaceous, or injured bear, to a Conservation Officer (CO) or RCMP officer.
- How to use aversive conditioning deterrents on a bear, if necessary. There are few situations where negative reinforcement or punishment of bears will be necessary at a bear viewing area however it is prudent to have the ability to do so when required. The two most likely situations are a bear asserting dominance toward people in unwanted circumstances and a bear that inadvertently gets some food reward from a non-natural attractant and aggressively pursues it.
- Emergency procedure in case of a guide or one of the guests is injured or mauled by a bear. This emergency procedure should include the following information:
 - The first priority is for the guide or guests to neutralize the threat from the bear if there is a safe means to do so, such as use of bear spray or a firearm.
 - The second priority is to secure the group and attend to the casualty, if it is now safe to do so.
 - Arrange for emergency evacuation of the casualty if there is serious injury by a bear. The casualty should get professional medical help even if the injuries do not seem serious as the risk of infection from bear bites or scratches is high.
 - The injury or mauling should be reported to a CO or RCMP officer as soon as possible. Any information deemed relevant to an investigation by the CO or RCMP must be provided.
 - Any time there is serious human injury caused by a bear a CO or RCMP officer likely will travel to the scene right away to investigate.
 - Ensure people on site minimize disturbance to the scene and do as much as possible to preserve evidence; warn others not to go in to the area of the mauling.
- Member companies will strive to reduce other potential hazards to guests as much as possible. For example,
 - Eliminate or reduce any feature on pathways or trails that may conceal a bear and increase the chance of a surprise encounter at close range. For example thick vegetation, such as shrubs, that may obscure visibility should be thinned or selectively removed to a minimum of one meter on either side of a trail. Blind corners should be remedied by straightening the trail as much as possible.

Access to Viewing Sites

- No helicopter or aerial viewing is permitted.
- Fixed wing aircraft or helicopter must maintain a minimum flyover distance, which is 500 feet of vertical height and 1000 feet of lateral distance.
- Vehicle and boat access must be done in a manner such as to minimize bear disturbance.
- Access routes must circumnavigate critical bear habitat, wherever possible.



Bear Viewing Guidelines

- Member companies will strive to meet the CBVA goal of safely viewing bears in a natural setting while minimizing impacts on them, and encourage the general public, other operators and film crews to do the same. An animal's need to forage, rest, or travel should take precedence over viewing activities and guests desire to get a closer look.
- Member companies can maintain safe and minimally disruptive interactions between humans and bears if a few guiding principles are followed:
 - Bears must not get access to non-natural attractants, such as human food or garbage.
 - People must respect bears "personal space" and never closely approach, crowd, pursue, or displace bears.
 - People must be willing to tolerate some bears in close proximity but also must reinforce in bears respect for human boundaries.
 - People must behave in as predictable a manner as possible around bears.
 - People must stay together as a group while viewing bears.
 - People must allow time for wary or less tolerant bears to feed and otherwise exploit available resources free from humans or human activity.
- Although the individual circumstances of bear viewing are often dynamic, it is important for operators and their guides to follow some minimum standards during viewing that adhere to these principles. The following outlines conditions on viewing that will help achieve these guiding principles.

Avoiding Food-Conditioning in Bears

- Every effort will be made to avoid food-conditioning of bears in and around bear viewing areas. Each operator also will institute measures to eliminate introduction of other attractants such as garbage and human waste into bear viewing areas.
- When it is necessary to carry food and beverages for longer outings, the food and any resulting garbage will be packed in air-tight or bear-proof containers and be kept with the guide at all times.

Minimizing Disturbance & Separation Distance

- Minimizing noise and movement while viewing bears helps limit disturbance to them.
- It may be advantageous to remain inconspicuous while watching bears from a long distance, but in most cases it is best to stay in the open where bears can see people and choose to avoid them if they wish.
- Spatial and temporal restrictions on human activity may be necessary at specific viewing sites to ensure that wary or less tolerant bears have access to important feeding sites.
- The distance at which bears allow people to approach varies significantly in different situations and between individual bears depending on their tolerance of people or level of habituation to human activity. Human behaviour also has a large impact on the distance at which a bear will negatively react to human presence. Bears use body language and vocalizations to communicate with each other and with humans. The better operators and guides understand these signals the more disturbance of bears can be avoided.



- In most bear viewing situations, guides will establish the distance between their group and the bear(s) they are attempting to watch. This distance will be dictated by a variety of factors including, the movement, activity and behaviour of bears, the mode of viewing (e.g., boat versus land-based, fixed site versus roving), tides, weather, and the movement, activity and behaviour of other viewing groups at the site.
- Once a guide has established a group at a respectful location and distance from a bear that does not disturb it, the guide will let individual bears decide how close they choose to approach the group. In this way, the minimum separation distance between a group and a bear will largely depend on the comfort of each individual bear. However, guides will set acceptable boundaries for each bear and not allow them to approach any closer. This is particularly important if the bear approaches to try and assert dominance over a group or exhibits excessive curiosity about a group or their equipment.

Predictability

- Consistent use of the same site(s) makes human use more predictable for bears and can help minimize disturbance.
- Consistent and appropriate human response to bears minimizes the chance of dangerous surprise encounters.
- The daily timing of bear viewing is dependent on a number of factors including tides, weather, light conditions, the movement and activity of bears, and the comfort and motivation of guests. However,
 - Guides will endeavour to be as predictable as possible in the daily timing of movements to and occupation of viewing sites. They will take guests to viewing sites at consistent times of the day and for a consistent length of time, as much as possible.
 - Guides will ensure no bear viewing takes place before first light and after dark.
 - Guides will minimize bear viewing in very poor visibility such as during heavy rain or fog.

Approaching a Bear

- Upon approach by a viewing group, a bear will check out the group to see what potential threat they pose. If it is comfortable with the group, then the bear should resume its normal activity with only occasional glances to monitor the group.
- At all times while approaching and viewing bears, guides will watch for behavioural signs indicating a bear is becoming nervous or stressed with the presence of the group, including:
 - A pause in activity or regularly stopping what it is doing and looking directly at the group. Not a quick scan or glance, but a direct look before returning to what it was doing.
 - A stiffening stance and change in body orientation.
 - A yawn or scratch or other behaviour, like sitting down, apparently out of place.
 - Moving into the bush and back out repeatedly.
 - Appearing nervous and uncertain.
 - Subtle teeth snapping or jaw popping.
- If a guide feels a bear is becoming stressed and the bear does not resume normal activity when the guide backs off with the group, then the guide will end the viewing session with that particular bear.



- Guides will be aware that if they continue to approach or crowd a stressed bear, it may show increased signs of distress, move off, or approach aggressively. In these situations, the guide has missed the early warning signs, disrupted a bear's normal activity pattern, and had an impact on the bear, which is counter to the intent of bear viewing. These situations will be avoided at all times.
- The following are signs of increased stress or aggression in a bear:
 - Rapid and conspicuous teeth snapping or jaw popping.
 - Moaning or growling.
 - Huffing or chuffing, which can escalate to rapid huffing.
 - Pacing.
 - Running away from or toward the group.
 - Salivating; roaring and open-mouth jawing.
 - Ears laid back.
 - Stamping the ground or paw swatting.
 - A hop charge.
 - A running charge, which may or may not stop short of contact.

Boat-based Viewing

- As guides scout for bears along shorelines or the perimeter of an estuary, they will be mindful that travelling too close to shore may displace nearby bears.
- All operators will minimize boat speed in the vicinity of an estuary.
- Boats will strive to approach a bear slowly, at an oblique angle to the shore where the bear has been located (i.e., not directly).
- Boats will decelerate well before the noise or wake of the boat disturbs bears or other wildlife (e.g., 200 metres or more depending on the size of boat, weather, behaviour of the bear, etc.).
- Assess the appropriate viewing distance for the particular circumstance based on:
 - the movement, activity and behaviour of the bear,
 - other boats and the number of viewing groups already in the vicinity
 - wind direction
 - depth of water and nature of tides or currents
- Guides will continually monitor the location and behaviour of other boats with viewing groups at a site, particularly around a bear they are viewing or interested in viewing. Too many boats can easily crowd and eventually displace a bear. The number of boats that a bear will tolerate depends on a variety of factors, including its level of habituation to boat traffic, its location in relation to food and security cover, and the movement and behaviour of the boats around it. If there are already two boats viewing a bear (*rafting* kayaks considered one boat), guides will carefully consider the additional stress they may cause to the bear before deciding to approach to view it.
- Where wind, tide and vessel load permit, guides may opt to propel under oar when optimizing positioning around a bear, particularly when other boats are in the vicinity.



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- At no time will a boat approach a bear closer than 50 metres. However, there may be instances when a boat is stationary or drifting silently and a bear's movement brings it to a distance closer than 50 metres. All guides will be mindful of maintaining an adequate depth of water beneath the boat to avoid being beached.
- Guides viewing a bear will rotate with waiting boats at an approximate interval of 20 minutes.
- When leaving a viewing session, boats will depart the scene in as unobtrusive a fashion as possible, given the vagaries of wind, tide, current and vessel load.
- Coordination, communication and respect for each others viewing opportunity will be paramount.

Land-based Viewing

- Guides will carry bear spray that is readily accessible whenever taking a group out on land.
- Groups of people (three or more) are generally safer around bears than individuals, but too large a group also has a greater probability of disturbing or displacing bears. The type of viewing (fixed site versus roving; fixed structure versus fixed location), bear tolerance and the level of habituation to human activity, the actions of people, and local geography and vegetation, will determine the optimal group size at specific viewing sites.
- It is suggested that the minimum size of a roving group be 4 guests
- It is suggested that the maximum size be 12-15 guests.
- In both situations it is suggested that there be no *more* than 8 guests per guide.
- In many cases, the behaviour of the group can be more disruptive to bears than group size, so guides and their group will act appropriately around bears at all times regardless of the group size.
- Members of a single viewing group will stay within a few arms' lengths of one another. Bears are apt to perceive a greater threat from two or more nearby groups than a single cohesive group.

Partnerships and Research

The Commercial Bear Viewing Association of BC member companies will strive for good relations with government and First Nations. We will link where appropriate with other industry, environmental and academic organizations to promote sustainable wilderness viewing and protection for bears and their ecosystems.

Credit

This document reflects many years and many thousands of hours of watching bears and watching humans watch bears by many people. It is meant to be an organic document to evolve and change over time. This document reflects the collected wisdom of the following people, organizations and source documents:

- Members of the Commercial Bear Viewing Association of BC.



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- Utah State University researchers Dr. Barrie Gilbert and Owen T. Nevin
- Grant MacHutchon
- Wayne McCrory
- Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, Wildlife Branch with special note to Doug Janz
- Land and Water British Columbia Inc.
- Glendale Cove Bear Viewing Management Plan
- Khutzeymateen Interim Protection Plan
- Best Practices for Viewing Bears on the West Side of Cook Inlet and the Katmai Coast, Alaska

Signed:

Name

Signature

Date