

WildSafeBC Annual Report 2014

Thompson-Nicola Regional District

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Executive Summary

The WildSafeBC program aims to reduce human-wildlife conflict throughout British Columbia. The program was delivered to communities within the Thompson-Nicola Regional District (TNRD) in 2014 by WildSafeBC Community Coordinator (WSCC) Emily Lomas. The messaging reached over 17,000 people in the TNRD, and media coverage further broadened the audience.

Reported wildlife activity, specifically predator activity, was relatively quiet in most areas throughout the TNRD in the spring and early summer of 2014 (with the exception of Clearwater). However, the fall season yielded many reports of conflicts with bears. These conflicts led to multiple bears being destroyed, primarily within Merritt (approximately 5) and Clearwater (approximately 10). It is also suspected that the 2014 berry crop failed in a few areas within the TNRD, leading bears into towns earlier than in previous years. Once in town, poorly managed garbage and livestock and livestock feed were the leading causes of bear destruction. More than 600 calls were placed to the Conservation Officer Reporting line in 2014 regarding wildlife within the TNRD, including over 450 black bear reports. Overall the top three ranked bear attractants in 2014 were, in order: garbage, fruit trees, and livestock/livestock feed.

This year-end report summarizes the activities, successes and challenges of the program in 2014, and provides recommendations for future WildSafeBC initiatives that stem from this year's experiences.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Program Delivery	3
Highlights of the Program	3
Events.....	3
Presentations	3
Contests	3
Door-to-Door and Garbage Tagging.....	4
Predator and Rattlesnake Safety Training	4
Rattlesnake Relocation	4
Bear-resistant Bin Testing.....	5
Electric Fencing Workshop.....	5
Media	5
Challenges to the Program.....	6
Goals for 2015.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
Appendix: Photographs.....	8

Program Delivery

Highlights of the Program

Events

Large events attended by the WSCC this year included the North Thompson Fall Fair and Rodeo, Logan Lake Day, Chase Cornstock Festival, Skeetchestn Indian Band Wellness Fair, Kanaka Bar Indian Band Wellness Day, Merritt Canada Day Celebrations, Pinantan Country Fair, Salute to Sockeye Festival, and farmers' markets. Booths set up at each of these events allowed the WSCC to provide informational brochures, promote contests, have hands-on educational materials for children, and talk one-on-one with TNRD residents. Many of these events were new venues added to the program in 2014.

Presentations

Following the transition from the Bear Aware program to the WildSafeBC program in 2013, presentations during 2014 included multiple wildlife species. However, presentations involving bears and bear and cougar safety were most frequently requested. All presentations were tailored to include pertinent information related to the particular location and audience, as well as any other specific requests. This year, the WSCC delivered presentations at the Kanaka Bar Indian Band, Harmon Lake Amphitheatre, and at select elementary schools. School visits include colouring contests and materials that children bring home, thus spreading the messages to parents and siblings. Some new hands-on outreach materials (models of animal prints) were purchased this year for presentations, and were very popular. Fewer schools were visited in 2014 than in previous years due to a teachers' strike. In addition, over 1,500 children participated in the WildSafeBC program at the Salute to Sockeye event in Chase, reducing the need for in-school visits. Groups attending the Salute to Sockeye included schools from Merritt, Ashcroft, Chase, Sun Peaks, and many others. Towards the end of the 2014 season, WildSafeBC introduced the Junior Ranger program for school-aged children, which will be continued in 2015. The program encourages active involvement of children in managing wildlife attractants throughout the home.

Contests

During the summer months, the WSCC used Facebook to request photos from residents documenting wildlife in the wild and in town. The photos were displayed on the WildSafeBC TNRD Facebook page. In October, WildSafeBC launched a colouring contest for children within the TNRD to help highlight the expected increase in human-bear conflict seen in the fall as bears prepare for winter.

Door-to-Door and Garbage Tagging

The WSCC used both door-to-door visits and garbage tagging campaigns (where bright attractant warning stickers are placed on waste containers that are put out on the curb the night before collection) during 2014. However, the primary focus this year was to use door-to-door visits in ‘problem’ neighbourhoods, at the request of local Conservation Officers. Targeted neighbourhoods included those in Logan Lake, Merritt, and Clearwater. The visits were spurred by incidences of improperly secured garbage and the use of outdoor freezers. Garbage tagging was performed in Merritt in October in a neighbourhood where bears had been destroyed due to improperly managed garbage.

Predator and Rattlesnake Safety Training

Bear safety information was included in most presentations during 2014, and the WSCC gave specific predator and rattlesnake safety training to field researchers based out of Lytton. The training included general bear and cougar biology, what do to in an encounter, different types of attacks, and an outdoor session to practice using bear spray. The snake training focused on rattlesnake identification, ecology, and how to work safely in rattlesnake habitat. This type of training is an important aspect of the WildSafeBC program, as we aim to become a source of wildlife safety training for people working and recreating in the outdoors.

A separate rattlesnake safety training session was also provided to Bylaw Officers, municipal government staff, and Ministry biologists at the BC Wildlife Park in Kamloops (see below). Snake handling equipment and live snakes were used in a hands-on demonstration. The training session was very well received.

Rattlesnake Relocation

WildSafeBC TNRD continued a rattlesnake relocation program launched in 2013 in collaboration with Ministry biologists, the Conservation Officer Service, and Bylaw Officers to assist residents with conflicts with rattlesnakes, which are a species-at-risk in BC. The above-mentioned individuals are often called upon to capture and relocate rattlesnakes. However, these staff members are often lacking the time or resources to respond to all relocation requests from the public, and unfortunately rattlesnakes may be killed by the public due to their perceived safety risk. In addition, suitable relocation sites and distances are potentially overlooked, creating exposure risks to snakes that are relocated. WildSafeBC aims to address these issues and provide a solution to unwanted human-rattlesnake encounters.

In the spring of 2014, a chain of command was finalized for calls from the public requesting rattlesnake relocation. Calls are first directed to the Conservation Officer Service reporting line. If a Conservation Officer cannot attend, the call is forwarded to the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations (Kamloops office), followed by City of Kamloops Bylaws, and then either Emily Lomas or Frank Ritcey with WildSafeBC.

A rattlesnake capture and relocation training session was hosted by Emily Lomas and WildSafeBC at the BC Wildlife Park in Kamloops. In attendance were City of Kamloops Bylaw Officers, TNRD Environmental Services staff, and biologists with the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations. The training included both classroom and hands-on components for capturing and relocating rattlesnakes safely and effectively, and using the correct equipment. Another session is planned for Bylaw Officers for the spring of 2015.

Bear-resistant Bin Testing

Garbage bin testing was initiated in 2013 and continued in 2014 at the BC Wildlife Park in Kamloops. When partnered with WildSafeBC and the media, this provides an excellent opportunity to educate the public. More testing is planned for 2015, as well as an electric fencing demonstration with the Park's bear keeper and WildSafeBC.

Electric Fencing Workshop

An electric fencing workshop was held in Clearwater in early September by the WSCC and Provincial Coordinator Frank Ritcey. There was general interest to hold the workshop, and high bear activity in Clearwater during the summer also prompted additional educational initiatives. More than a dozen local residents attended the workshop, in addition to several tourists who stopped by to listen.

Media

All forms of media were used to reach audiences; press releases and interviews were given to newspapers, radio, and television stations. The WSCC was featured on CFJC TV in the spring. Q101.1 in Merritt ran radio ads reminding residents to manage attractants, as well as a 'wildlife alert' when bear activity was high in the city. Newspaper articles appeared in the Merritt Herald, Clearwater Times, North Thompson Times, Barriere Star Journal, and other associated outlets. Residents were also encouraged to use Facebook for notice of events and helpful tips.

Challenges to the Program

Our primary challenge remains that of changing the public's habits in regards to major attractants (e.g. garbage and fruit trees). Many people soon return to old habits, even though they are initially receptive to the program's mandates. Repeated presence by the WSCC or volunteers would be beneficial in these areas, but new initiatives may be even more useful. Upon discussion with a local Conservation Officer, it was evident that new programs may be needed to curb the behaviour of residents when it comes to securing garbage. A new program has been proposed for 2015 to loan out bear-resistant bins to TNRD residents in problem areas. A second challenge this year was attracting volunteers to the program. The program had only one volunteer sign up late in the season.

Goals for 2015

The following is a list of recommendations for WildSafeBC initiatives in future years:

- Initiate a bear-resistant bin loan-out program, modeled from similar (very successful) programs in the Kootenay and Albert Foothills regions. The program would provide TNRD residents access to bear-resistant garbage bins in problem areas for a minimum loan-out period of 6 weeks. Residents have the option of purchasing the bins at the end of the loan-out period. A proposal and budget summary is currently being prepared for this program.
- Use project funds to purchase new animal display items. Newly purchased animal prints were very popular this year. It would be valuable to include other animal pelts and skulls.
- Continue with additional predator fencing workshops.
- Encourage users of predator fencing and bear-resistant bins to set up trail cameras to assess the success of the products (and use as additional educational material).
- Contact local agencies that have a wide audience to incorporate the WildSafeBC messaging into their literature (e.g. Naturalist Clubs, the B.C. Cattlemen's Association).
- Build a base of volunteers throughout the TNRD. Unfortunately, due to the TNRD's large size, it is not always possible to provide a constant presence in locations where attractants remain a problem. Adult volunteers are preferable in outlying communities, since the WSCC would not have to travel to be present to work alongside them.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the WildSafeBC program, I would like to thank the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, the Ministry of Environment, and the British Columbia Conservation Foundation for funding this year's program and activities.

I would also like to acknowledge the various media outlets that ran stories to help spread the WildSafeBC message. These include the Clearwater Times, the Merritt Herald, the Barriere Star Journal, Q101.1 Merritt, and CFJC TV.

Special thanks to Adriana Mailloux, Jamie Vieira and Denise Roberts of the TNRD; Frank Ritcey of the WildSafeBC program; and Barb Waters, Roseanna Niedziejko, Tami Kendall and Jen Bellhouse of the British Columbia Conservation Foundation.

Appendix: Photographs



Figure 1. E. Lomas and a student investigating the sizes of bear paws at the Salute to Salmon event in Chase.



Figure 2. A field research crew member learning to use bear spray during a training session in Lytton.



Figure 3. The WildSafeBC display at the Merritt Farmers' Market.



Figure 4. A black bear testing a bear-resistant bin at the BC Wildlife Park.



Figure 5. Students learn all about different animal prints at a school presentation.