Bear Viewing

BEST PRACTICES

J. Gavin

Goal of "Best Practices"

Minimize disturbance to bears and their habitat while providing opportunities to enjoy, observe and photograph bears in the wild while learning about their natural history, behavior and habitat requirements.

Although brown bears are inherently wild and potentially dangerous, they have developed distinct social cues and practices that allow them to live and eat near other bears. This is especially true around seasonally abundant food sources such as sedge meadows and salmon spawning streams.

If people learn and adhere to the rules bears observe for themselves, bears will more likely accept our presence as an unobtrusive part of their environment, and will continue to feed and carry on their natural behavior while being watched. Understanding bear behavior also reduces dangerous encounters and benefits both bears and people.

Best Practices for Viewing Bears

Reduce disturbance of bears & their habitat

- **Respect a bear's "personal space"**

Never closely approach, crowd, pursue, disturb or displace bears. Bears have limited opportunities to gain calories necessary to maintain life and prepare for denning. Displacing bears from feeding sites has serious consequences for them.

The distance at which bears can allow people varies dramatically in different situations and between individual bears. Human behavior also has a large impact on a bear's "personal space." Bears use body language and vocalizations to communicate with each other. The better humans understand these signals, the more conflicts can be avoided. Spatial and temporal restrictions on human activity may be necessary to ensure that the less tolerant bears have access to the feeding sites.

- **Stay together in bear country**

Groups of people numbering three or more are generally safer than individuals. Members of a viewing group should stay within a few arms' lengths of one another. Bears may perceive a greater threat from two or more nearby groups than a single cohesive group.

Best Practices for Viewing Bears

Reduce disturbance of bears & their habitat

- **Consistently use the same viewing sites**

In places where people regularly visit, consistent use of the same site makes human use more predictable for bears, and thus may help minimize disturbance. People should avoid monopolizing a site where the bears prefer to fish or feed.

- **Access viewing sites in a consistent manner that minimizes disturbances**

When accessing viewing sites, people should strive to minimize disturbance to bears, bear habitat and other people. When going to a viewing area on foot, it is usually best to be visible while approaching rather than sneaking to the area and possibly surprising bears. When using an aircraft, vehicle, or boat to access viewing sites, be respectful to both bears and people.

- **Minimize disturbance when bear viewing from planes, boats, or vehicles**

Guidelines for reducing bear disturbance while engaged in bear viewing from planes, motorized watercraft, kayaks or land-based vehicles are equivalent to other bear viewing practices. Consistency, minimal displacement, and disturbance to bears are the key factors to be considered.

NPS., R. Wood

Best Practices for Viewing Bears

Reduce disturbance of bears & their habitat

- **Promote predictable human behavior**

Each encounter is a learning experience for both bears and people. Appropriate and consistent human responses to bears minimize the chances of dangerous surprise encounters and can provide safer and better bear viewing experiences.

In most cases it is best to stay in the open where bears can see people and avoid them if they wish. Hiding from bears increases the likelihood that people will have a surprise encounter that could result in a dangerous situation for the bear and/or the person. Minimizing noise and movement while viewing bears will help limit disturbance to bears using the area.

- **Avoid displacing & food-conditioning bears when recreating next to critical bear use areas**

Overnight camping and fishing may attract and/or displace some bears near important feeding areas, and should be carefully monitored and managed. Campsites should be located well away from bear travel corridors and feeding sites. Sport anglers must be careful to avoid attracting bears when playing fish they have caught and/or storing fish in an unsecured manner.

- **Optimal numbers of people should be evaluated at well-known bear viewing sites**

This may be necessary to maintain high quality bear viewing experiences and to minimize disturbance. Optimal numbers of people should be determined by observing bear behavior and access to the area. If optimal numbers of people need to be established at viewing sites, they will be be based on impacts to bears, visitor experience, and general habitat protection, and will be developed with public participation.

Best Practices for Viewing Bears

Be unobtrusive components of the bears' environment

- **Ensure bears don't obtain food from people**

Bear-resistant food and garbage storage is critical to ensure that bears do not obtain fish or food from humans. No food or objects should be abandoned in order to distract an approaching bear. Do not cook near bear travel corridors or feeding sites. Ensure that no trace of food or garbage is left during or after the visit.

- **Discourage curious or aggressive bears from approaching**

If a young bear learns it can push people around, the bear can become a problem. If a bear is approaching people, people need to make sure they are not inadvertently blocking its travel path or monopolizing a feeding site. If, after people attempt to get out of its way, a bear continues to approach too closely, people should assert themselves to defend a consistent personal space. Assertive actions should begin with the most innocuous such as holding one's ground (not moving away from the bear), raising one's arms and waving, speaking to the bear, and standing on a higher object. If approach continues, assertive actions should escalate appropriately.

- **Trained bear viewing guides can reduce viewer impacts & improve experiences**

Well-trained, experienced guides or government staff can ensure people follow guidelines and behave in an appropriate, consistent manner. Guides provide agencies with information on human activities in the field and are an excellent conduit for agencies to inform and hear from the public.

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Best Practices for Viewing Bears

Incorporate education into every bear viewing opportunity

- **Human impacts on bears and their habitat should be monitored**

Agency resource managers have an obligation to learn as much as possible about how people are affecting bears and to take action when warranted. Monitoring may entail simply keeping in touch with guides and other people or it may be appropriate to develop and implement a detailed scientific protocol. Information collection should be ongoing and open to public interaction.

- **Concise, accurate bear education information should be provided at key locations**

Lodges, air-taxi offices, agency offices, visitor centers, web sites, and charter boats are excellent outlets for providing people with education materials.

- **Guide training should be available for taking people into the field for bear viewing**

Training programs that offer information about basic bear behavior, habitat considerations, and human impacts on bears will greatly enhance visitor experiences and encourage better stewardship of resources. In some areas, mandatory training may be considered for commercial operators and agency personnel dealing with bear viewers.

Background

Public interest in watching brown bears has increased dramatically in Alaska during the past decade. Some of this activity is incidental to other pursuits such as sport fishing, hiking, or flight seeing, but much of it is specifically targeted at bear viewing. Whenever bears and people interact with each other there are potential benefits and dangers for both species.

The "best practices" were produced principally for the west side of Cook Inlet and the Katmai Coast, Alaska, an area that stretches from the Susitna River to Cape Kubugakli, but they may be applicable to other areas as well. They provide natural resource managers, bear viewing guides, and the general public with a template for dealing with bear-people interactions. In some areas site-specific guidelines or regulations may be necessary to address unique circumstances, and close cooperation between agencies and the public will be needed to develop those.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the National Park Service natural resource managers, with input from bear viewing guides and the general public, have developed the "Best Viewing Practices." The "Best Practices" are an effort to minimize adverse impacts on bears and their habitat while maximizing the opportunity for people to learn about and enjoy bears.

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