



Best Practices for Viewing Bears on the West Side of Cook Inlet and the Katmai Coast



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. Natural resource managers in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the National Park Service, with input from bear viewing guides and the general public, have developed the following “best viewing practices” in an effort to minimize adverse impacts on bears and their habitat while maximizing the opportunity for people to learn about and enjoy bears.

The best way to watch bears is to avoid any close encounters that would influence the bears’ behavior or activities. There are currently many opportunities to watch bears in this way, but in areas where bears are seasonally concentrated near abundant food sources, nearby viewing may be possible. In most cases, the closer bears and people are to each other, the greater the chance for interaction and the greater the need for developing ways of encouraging consistent appropriate human conduct around bears and their habitat.

Even though 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 like sedge meadows and salmon spawning streams. If people learn and adhere to the rules the bears observe for themselves, they will be more likely to accept our presence as an unobtrusive part of the environment, and will continue to feed and carry on their natural behavior while being watched. A better understanding of bear behavior will also reduce dangerous encounters and thereby benefit bears and people alike.

The following “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.

Goal

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.

Best Practices

1) Reduce disturbance of bears and their habitat.

- a) **Respect bears “personal space”.** People should 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.

- b) **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. Consistent appropriate human behavior can provide safer and better bear viewing experiences.

While watching bears from a long distance it may be advantageous to remain inconspicuous, 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. 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.

- c) **Encourage people to stay together in bear country.** Groups of people (three or more) are generally safer than individuals, but too large a group also has a greater probability of disturbing or displacing bears. The surrounding geography and vegetation, typical bear behavior and the actions of the people will determine the optimal group size. In many cases, the behavior of the group may be more disruptive to bears than the group size. Members of a single viewing group should 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.
- d) **Consistently use the same viewing sites.** In places where people regularly visit (e.g., every day or so), consistent use of the same site makes human use more predictable for bears, and thus may help minimize disturbance. People should avoid using areas that monopolize a site where the bears prefer to fish or feed.
- e) **Access viewing sites in a consistent manner that minimizes disturbances.** When going to and from viewing sites, people should strive to minimize disturbance to bears, bear habitat and other people. Access to viewing areas by aircraft, vehicle or boat should be done in ways that are respectful to both bears

and people. When going to a viewing area on foot, it is usually best to be visible and casual while approaching rather than sneaking to the area and possibly surprising bears. Brushy surroundings that are used as resting and secure areas by bears should be avoided. Use of an established trail may make human movements more predictable to bears that frequent an area.

- f) **Flight-seeing and other vehicle-based bear viewing should be conducted in a manner that is minimizes disturbance.** Guidelines for reducing bear disturbance while engaged in viewing bears from planes, motorized watercraft, kayaks or land-based vehicles are equivalent to other bear viewing practices. Consistency and minimal displacement and disturbance of bears are the key factors to be considered. Site-specific recommendations and regulations may be necessary in areas where problems arise.
- g) **Some recreational activities next to critical feeding areas and/or travel routes may contribute to food-conditioning and displacement of bears.** Human activities such as overnight camping and fishing may attract and/or displace some bears near important feeding areas, and should carefully monitored and managed. Bears, especially young ones, are curious and exploitive of new situations. Campsites provide opportunities for young bears to get into trouble and should be located well away from bear travel corridors and feeding sites. Sport anglers must be careful to avoid attracting bears by playing fish they have caught and/or storing fish in an unsecured manner.
- h) **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 based on impacts to bears, visitor experience, and general habitat protection, and will be developed with public participation.

2) **Make viewers unobtrusive components of the bears' environment.**

- a) **Ensure that bears do not obtain any food from people.** Bear-resistant food and garbage storage, as well as efforts to ensure bears do not obtain fish or game from humans are critical. No food or other object should be abandoned in order to distract an approaching bear. Do not cook near bear travel corridors or feeding sites and ensure that all people leave no trace of food or garbage during or after their visit.
- b) **Curious or aggressive bears should be actively discouraged from approaching people.** If a bear is approaching people, they 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, then they should assert themselves to define and 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. If a young bear learns it can push people around, this behavior is reinforced and the bear can become a problem.

- c) **Trained bear viewing guides can reduce impacts of viewing and improve viewers' experiences.** Well-trained and experienced guides or government staff can ensure people follow guidelines and behave in an appropriate and consistent manner. Guides also provide agencies with information on human activities in the field and can be an excellent conduit for agencies to get information to and from the public.

3) **Incorporate education in to every bear viewing opportunity.**

- a) **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.
- b) **Guide training should be available for anyone 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.
- c) **Human impacts on bears and their habitat should be monitored.** Natural 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.