

# Sojourn in Bear Country: The Making of NWF's *BEARS*

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For millennia, humans looked up to the night sky and saw in a certain configuration of stars a familiar shape. This constellation we now call Ursa Major—the Great Bear. Some societies ascribed special powers to the celestial bear and believed that it could move between Earth and sky.

And for millennia, bears moved freely throughout the globe. Like humans, bears are adaptable. Like us, they'll eat almost anything. Like us, they can make a home in many different environments. Of the seven continents, all but Antarctica and Australia have been home to bears. In the last one hundred years, though, the balance of power between humans and bears has shifted dramatically against the bear.

Yet bears continue to hold sway over our imaginations. They are the epitome of wilderness. They inspire feelings of awe, respect—and fear.

National Wildlife Federation's latest film, *Bears*, brings Earth's largest terrestrial predator to the giant screen. Shot against the backdrop of spectacular wilderness, *Bears* brings viewers in closer contact with these majestic—and, at times, comical—animals than is possible in the wild.

The film opens with a visual montage of the bears of the world, then explores in depth the three North American species—the black bear, the “grizzly” or brown bear, and the polar bear. These and the world's five other species face threats to their survival in all or significant portions of their remaining range.

The fate of the smallest of all bears, the sun bear, is linked to the disappearing rain forests of Southeast Asia. For a long time, the Asiatic black bear has been hunted for its organs, believed to hold magical healing powers. The giant panda of China hovers on the brink of extinction in the world's most populous nation. In South America, the spectacled bear, once venerated by Incas, is now pursued as a pest. No one knows how few sloth bears linger on in parts of India and Sri Lanka. It is in the New World where bears still hold in any numbers, although their range is drastically reduced.

I've been privileged to visit bears where they eat, play, and prowl. In the film, naturalist and bear guide Chris Day acts as our liaison between humans and the world of bears. When we were researching the film, Chris took me out to view bears feasting on salmon in the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary in Alaska—one of nature's most amazing spectacles. To take a walk in woods that you know contain bears is to feel a certain stirring of the blood—even when your guide is as experienced and knowledgeable as Chris Day.

Not all of us can go into the wilderness to view bears, but a film like this can bring bears to us. The National Wildlife Federation has invested significant funds in large-format films, on both the production and distribution sides, because we believe that these films are one of the best ways to promote public education about conservation issues. We aim to inform and inspire audience to take action, on a personal and civic level, to ensure wise stewardship of our natural heritage.

The theme of *Bears* is survival. The black bear, the most common bruin of North America, has to survive an infancy that is rife with dangers. The survival rate of black bear cubs is about 50 percent. The grizzly, also known as the brown bear, has to survive its fierce reputation. It has been over hunted, and its habitat has been greatly reduced. The polar bear, the only bear that is almost exclusively carnivorous (which makes filming it an interesting experience), is threatened by global warming that shortens its time on the ice hunting for its primary prey—ringed seals. My hope is that *Bears* enables audiences to have a deeper understanding of an animal that humans have regarded with mixed emotions for most of history.

At early NWF story conferences, the subject of bears did not, however, elicit mixed emotions. In fact, as we discussed what possible species we would film after our success with the large-screen films, *Whales, Dolphins* (produced by MacGillivray Freeman Films in association with NWF), and *Wolves*, bears emerged as the unequivocal choice. We formed a strategic alliance with the Canadian large-format company, Primesco, led by Goulam Amarsy. It was Goulam who first proposed a large format film on bears.

As we explored the subject, we discovered that Science North, a major science center in Ontario, Canada, was also considering a film on bears. I met with David Lickley, the top film maker at Science North, and we found that we shared a common vision. Science North is an educational institution. NWF is America's largest membership conservation organization. We decided to pool our resources and create this film. NWF and Primesco are distributing the film.

NWF has been working to conserve bears for decades. North American bears have been one of our highest priorities, going back to 1951, when we were asked to step in and help preserve the Kodiak bear, a type of grizzly that lives on Kodiak and nearby islands in the Gulf of Alaska.

Most recently, we have been actively engaged in the ongoing effort to reintroduce grizzly bears into the 5,785 square miles of the Selway-Bitterroot and adjacent Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Areas in central Idaho and western Montana. Grizzlies roamed the Selway-Bitterroot as late as the 1940s before being hunted to extinction in the region. These powerful, magnificent animals once numbered in the tens of thousands and ranged from the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean. Today, they occupy less than 2 percent of their former range in the contiguous 48 states.

The grizzly is one of the species highlighted in NWF's "Keep the Wild Alive" campaign. This project seeks to build support for endangered species by educating the public, media, and policy makers about wildlife issues. Film, which reaches out to an audience of millions, can play an

important part in moving people to action. At NWF we see films as a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

This doesn't mean that we don't go after the most spectacular footage. On the contrary, we realize we can best inspire people to preserve the wild by giving them the opportunity to see what could be lost.

Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve is home to an estimated 2,000 grizzlies and has the highest recorded density in the world. So it was to mountains and rivers of Katmai that our crew went to film these bears. The film culminates in a great feast—a gathering of many grizzlies fishing for salmon in the McNeil River. Dave Lickley, our director, recalls, “The most notorious thing about filming in Alaska is the unpredictability of the weather. Yet, the last week we went out to film the bears fishing in the McNeil River we had the best weather imaginable. Sunny, clear days! Viewers will be astounded by the quality of the footage we were able to capture with this extraordinary light.”

Nevertheless, the changeable weather exacted a very heavy toll. Our film is dedicated to the memory of two researchers who were to serve as scientific advisors to our film. Dr. Malcolm Ramsey and Dr. Stuart Innis had devoted their lives to the study of polar bears and, in particular, to the effects of global warming on the bears. They were killed in a helicopter crash just before they were due to begin helping us on the film. The loss was particularly hard on our director, Dave Lickley, who had gone to school with Malcolm Ramsey and had known him for 25 years. The scientific community lost two dedicated and knowledgeable men, and bears lost two effective advocates for their conservation.

Global warming is already a pressing problem for polar bears in southern parts of their range. To catch a dinner they need to foray out over the frozen sea after seal meat. But as temperatures rise, the seas are frozen for shorter periods and polar bears are hard-pressed to maintain their weight and reproductive capability.

Of all bear species, polar bears are the most dangerous because they are almost completely carnivorous. They have evolved to treat anything that moves on the frozen sea as potential prey. We had a close call with one technician in the Arctic when we were filming polar bears. This technician caught the attention of a polar bear and barely made it back into the vehicle in time.

The odd thing about bears is that you watch them lope around and they put you in mind of big, furry cows. These “cows” have long claws and sharp teeth and can hit 30 miles an hour in a short time. Suddenly, one will get frisky and take a swipe at another one. It all happens so fast! We did manage to get some great footage of polar bears sparring and wrestling.

Yet the aspect of their behavior that most struck me as I watched the film take shape was their playfulness. Some of the film's most memorable images are of bears playing. I think these scenes are very valuable in reminding people of the complexity of bears and their right to live unharassed lives in fully functioning ecosystems.

When people think of bears, they often think of bear attacks. Most of the time, though, bears live a placid existence. Humans can learn to live with bears in our wilderness areas if we are respectful of their behaviors and needs for space. As NWF field biologist and scientific advisor for *Bears*, Dr. Sterling Miller, says, “Bears are intelligent, powerful, and gentle, but not to be taken lightly. They need wild areas in order to thrive. Our fears about bears need to be replaced by a deeper grasp of the important role these top predators play in both the natural setting and in our human culture.”

Native American peoples understood this, and many of their myths and legends told of the supernatural powers of bears. *Bears* not only carries a conservation message, it also intricately folds into its narrative the images and stories of the role of bears in Native cultures.

To the Inuit people of the Arctic, for example, the most powerful animal in their world was the polar bear. They believed that the spirit of the bear was interchangeable with the human spirit. Like humans, the bear stood upright to face its foes. Like humans, the bear was a great hunter. Their name for the bear was Nanook—the great white hunter. Their soapstone carvings of polar bears show an understanding of the animal based on close observation that blends science and artistry.

With, I hope, similar deftness, NWF films, and in particular, *Bears*, blend education and entertainment. Although beautiful to watch, and with a story line that is both informative and evocative, *Bears* carries an important conservation message. We’ve designed educational materials to accompany the film that will help drive home the lessons to be learned from the bears’ struggle to survive.

My colleague, Jim Stofan, Vice President for Education at NWF, notes, “We have a great advantage in working with bears because they are an exciting, charismatic species. Our main goal is to have students understand the need to protect the habitat for bears.”

In our educational efforts, we use multiple media to reach out to audiences (*see accompanying sidebar*). In conjunction with the *Bears* premiere, all three of NWF’s children’s magazines will feature articles and activities centered on bears. The website will contain a bank of material and resources on bear information, and we’ll add content as the film increases its presence in theaters. We’re creating curriculum materials that are interactive, hands-on, and inquiry-based—which means that students are encouraged to ask questions and the teacher acts as a guide, not as a lecturer. Our overall message to kids and adults is that you, personally, can make a difference.

Our film contains the story of one man who made a difference. It was the chance encounter between an American president and a young bear that help turn the tide of feeling away from uncontrolled hunting and toward the practice of wildlife conservation. On a hunting trip, Theodore Roosevelt, the US president who founded our National Park system, came muzzle to muzzle with a young cub. In a moment of compassion, the president lowered his gun, and the defenseless animal ran off. The story spread and led to the creation of a new toy in Roosevelt’s honor—the Teddy Bear.

*Bears* captures the timeless appeal of cubs as viewers follow the antics of two black bear cubs that emerge with their mother into the springtime of the Bitterroot Valley. Over the next few months the cubs learn what foods to eat and what to avoid, who is friend and who is foe, that water is wet and trees are made to fall out of. There is one heart-stopping sequence when the two cubs follow their mother into a stream. The current is fast, and the cubs are swept downstream. Will they cross to safety? They do, but it's touch and go for awhile.

You find yourself, as a member of the audience, rooting for their survival. This is the best thing that NWF films can do—to make viewers care about the fate of a species and from that empathic spark, take the leap to caring about the fate of other species and the protection of their habitats.

*Bears* goes into the wilderness and lets the animals “speak” for themselves through natural behavior in natural settings. To paraphrase Chief Dan George: what we can understand, we will not fear; what we do not fear, we will protect. *Bears* celebrates the great spirit of the great American bears.

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