

# Green Scene: Garbage and Bears

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[photograph]

[caption: This bear family, foraging for food in improperly secured garbage cans, was captured in Port Moody in late September and relocated to the Chehalis Lake area.  
City of Port Moody photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: No wonder bears feel welcome here]

With a number of stories about nuisance bears appearing in newspapers over the past few weeks, you might think there is a bit of a bear invasion going on. However, this is not case. The bears have always been here...even before we arrived. Unfortunately, not too many years ago, bears that wandered into residential areas were removed and, more often than not, killed. Although we are now attempting to be more tolerant of their presence, our behaviour still continues to threaten their survival. We tend to characterize the problem as a “bear problem” when, in reality, it is the thoughtless actions and habits of people that tempt bears into situations that lead to conflicts.

Found only in North America, the black bear actually comes in a variety of colours that range from black to brown, cinnamon and, even, white. The famous spirit bear of the Great Bear Rainforest is unique subspecies of the black bear in which about 10% of the population is white. While it is unclear why the white colouration developed in bear populations along our northern coast, some scientists speculate this colour, by making the bears less visible to prey beneath them in the water, may be advantageous to animals that forage for live salmon.

Like humans, bears are omnivorous and eat a wide range of foods depending on what is seasonally available. When they first emerge from hibernation in the spring, they will forage for roots, insects, small mammals, carrion and a variety of vegetation including even the cambium (inner bark) of coniferous trees. Later, as berries ripen, these will also be added to their diet. While bears tend to be nocturnal feeders, an abundant food supply will encourage them to forage during daylight hours. By fall, bears develop huge appetites because they need to put on weight in preparation for the hibernation period when they will not feed for several months. The carcasses of spawned-out salmon in streams and an abundance of ripening fruits provide bears with the calories they require in the fall.

Unfortunately, bears in urban areas have learned about other sources of food, in particular, the year-round supply of garbage cans that can provide them with some hearty meals as well as bird feeders and over-ripened fruit from unharvested trees in backyards. Drake Stephens, our local Bear Aware supervisor ([www.bearaware.bc.ca](http://www.bearaware.bc.ca)) believes local bears are showing evidence of a far too-abundant food supply. While bears in the wild rarely breed before the age of five, Stephens knows of some local bears that have produced young at age three. What’s worse, local female bears often produce twins or even triplets. Multiple births are also indicative of an overly abundant food supply.

Although the provincial government initiated the Bear Aware Program with the wise intention of educating people how to behave around bears, far too many people are simply not getting the message. Garbage cans, full of tempting treats, are left in places where bears can easily access them. Many people appear unwilling to wait to place garbage at curb-side until pickup day. Rather than discouraging bears by making noise or throwing rocks when they appear in neighbourhoods, people get their cameras and follow the bears around to take pictures. No wonder bears get the message they don't need to be cautious around people. Ultimately, this will only lead to conflicts that will result in bears being caught, relocated (which is rarely successful) or, possibly, killed.

When I walk in forests and parks, I know that I am in bear territory and behave appropriately by, e.g., making noise (talking or breaking a twig, if alone). However, when bears are in my backyard, I want those bears to know they are unwelcome in human territory. I keep a pile of stones on our second floor deck to heave in the general direction of any bear that checks out our backyard and our garbage can is kept empty or well secured. While I support educational efforts, maybe it's time to think about stronger enforcement measures for those who are causing the problem.