

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Rebecca Benjamin-Carey
communications@kxsa.ca
(250) 222-7794

Kitasoo Xai'xais and Gitga'at First Nations Celebrate Ban on Black Bear Hunting to Protect Spirit Bears

Closure in Nations' territories aims to protect culturally significant spirit bears, exemplifies progress through collaboration

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KLEMTU AND HARTLEY BAY, JULY 19TH, 2022 — Hunting for black bears in part of the Great Bear Rainforest on B.C.'s Central Coast has been closed in an effort to save the rare spirit bear.

Spirit bears, also known as Kermode bears, are black bears with a completely white coat.

The hunting ban was introduced because the bear's white coat is the result of a rare genetic mutation, and it is impossible to know which black bears carry the white gene.

“Every time you shoot a black bear in this region, it could be carrying the recessive copy of the gene that produces the spirit bear,” said Chief Councillor Doug Neasloss of the Kitasoo Xai'xais First Nation in Klemtu.

Exceptionally uncommon, spirit bears reach their highest global prevalence – approximately 1 in 10 black bears – in Kitasoo Xai'xais and Gitga'at territories near the communities of Klemtu and Hartley Bay.

The provincial government's hunting ban was introduced on July 1 and follows a joint proposal from the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority (KXSA) and the Gitga'at Ocean and Lands Department (GOLD).

The proposal was based on the Nations' desire to ensure the long-term survival of the white bear.

The ban outlaws the hunting of black bears in areas that are the most important for spirit bear conservation. These are regions where black bears have the highest likelihood of carrying the spirit bear gene and where black bear populations that contain spirit bears have low genetic diversity. The closed areas cover 8,158km² of Kitasoo Xai'xais and Gitga'at First Nation territories and approximately 13% of the Great Bear Rainforest.

“The closures are critically important for spirit bear conservation,” said Dr. Christina Service, a wildlife biologist with the KXSA and adjunct assistant professor in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria.

“The spirit bear represents a unique evolutionary lineage of black bears and, alarmingly, recent research shows these bears are even rarer than previously believed,” said Service.

Chief Neasloss of Klemtu remarks, “This hunting closure is a monumental occasion, and a big step towards protecting these spirit bears that are so important culturally and economically to the region.”

Both Nations run bear-viewing businesses that are major employers and revenue earners, along with at least 18 other commercial bear-viewing operators.

“This is exciting news for Gitga’at Nation and our neighbouring Nation Kitasoo Xai’xais,” said Marven Robinson, elected councillor of the Gitga’at Nation. Marven runs an adventure tours company that explores river valleys near Hartley Bay in search of spirit bears, referred to as moksgmol, meaning “white bear,” in Tsimshian.

“There was a lot of work done to get to this point, and it has been a long time coming. The moksgmol is highly revered by the Gitga’at people and was never talked about until we needed to ensure its protection,” continued Robinson.

Since time immemorial, spirit bears have had deep cultural significance for the Kitasoo Xai’xais and Gitga’at people, featuring prominently in songs, dances, and stories. More broadly, spirit bears – the provincial mammal – are important to all British Columbians. Synonymous with wilderness, they are ambassadors for the protection of the Great Bear Rainforest.

It has been illegal to kill a spirit bear since the early 20th century.

“We see the hunting ban as an encouraging example of government-to-government collaboration and look forward to continuing to work with the Fish and Wildlife Branch on other regulation changes in the future,” said Neasloss.

For interview or media requests, contact Rebecca Benjamin-Carey, Communications Coordinator, at communications@kxsa.ca or (250) 222-7794

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