Feature article

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**Environment Issues in British Columbia**

**How Expansion of Wildlife is Affecting Cities in B.C.**

British Columbia is a stunning natural landscape and is surrounded by rich nature. Enjoying the outdoors such as hiking, kayaking, and camping is a big part of our lives. Yet, alongside this natural beauty, it’s also home to an incredible variety of wildlife from grizzly beards and cougars to bald easels and salmon. However, each year, too many bears and other wildlife are killed because of human decisions and behaviour which leaves us with a significantly challenging problem that demands attention such as human-wildlife conflicts. These conflicts happen when human activities intersect with the habitats and behaviours of wild animals, often resulting in inconvenient outcomes for both humans and animals. For instance, as cities grow and spread into wildlife areas, animals eventually lose their homes, thereby they end up having to search for new places to live or fight for space and fins with humans which causes conflicts. Another thing we may not realize the consequences is that leaving out garbage or pet food can tempt animals like bears, raccoons and coyotes to come closer to our homes. Especially when they get used to finding around people, it can lead to more conflicts. In this article, we explore the intricate causes, far-reading impacts on humans and animals and promising solutions to address human-wildlife conflicts in the diverse landscapes of British Columbia.

The rapid expansion of human activities in British Columbia has brought about significant transformations in its natural landscape. It reshapes the delicate balance between humans and wildlife. Organization, industrial development and the proliferation of recreational pursuits have collectively exerted profound impacts on the province’s biodiversity. As cities grow and infrastructure expands, previously untouched habitats are being encroached upon and divided. The once-wild wilderness is now being replaced by highways, housing and commercial areas, leaving wildlife with smaller areas of suitable habitats. This loss and fragmentation of habitats have various consequences including increased interactions between humans and wildlife as their territories now overlap. Large wild animals such as bears, cougars and deer are increasingly coming into contact with humans in urban and suburban areas due to shrinking their territories and decreasing food sources. This leads to conflicts and humans view these encounters as threats to their safety and property. It’s resulting in calls for intervention and management strategies. Furthermore, human activities go beyond simply encroaching on habitats and directly contribute to the decline of wildlife populations through unsustainable practices. Hunting, poaching and the illegal wildlife race extend relentless pressure on vulnerable species and push them dangerously close to extinction. The unending demand for exotic pets, animals' parts and trophies from hunting perpetuates a cycle of exploitation that further strains already imperilled populations. The impact of human activities on the environment has far-reaching consequences and highlights the conflicting priorities between conservation and human interests. Efforts to protect endangered wildlife are hindered by ongoing human development. The need to preserve biodiversity and ecological balance clashes with the goals of economic growth and societal progress leading to ongoing conflicts and compromises. To address these challenges, a fundamental shift is necessary to balance conservation and human development. Innovative approaches focusing on habitat preservation, suitable land-use planning and coexistence strategies can help achieve this delicate equilibrium. By incorporating ecological considerations into urban planning and actively involving local communities, we can work towards reducing the negative effects of human-wildlife conflicts while safeguarding our natural heritage for future generations.

Another major issue is that the economic impacts of human-wildlife conflicts in British Columbia extend far beyond immediate losses, affecting various sectors and industries and imposing significant financial burdens on communities and the provincial economy as a whole. For instance, agriculture is a crucial part of British Columbia’s economy and it suffers significant damage from wildlife. Wildlife preying on crops and livestock leads to substantial agricultural losses and disrupts food production systems. The destruction of crops by wildlife such as deer, elk and bears not only reduces yields but also requires expensive measures including fencing, deterrents and compensation programs. These costs strain the financial resources of farmers and contribute to economic disparities within rural communities. Additionally, property damage caused by wildlife worsens the economic impact of human-wildlife conflicts. Bears rummaging through garbage bins, dear feeding on gardens and cougars roaming residential areas pose threats to property and personal safety. Homeowners face expenses for repairing fences replacing damaged landscaping and installing deterrents to prevent future incidents. Insurance claims for wildlife-related property damage further burden insurers and raise premiums for affected individuals and communities. Furthermore, the tourism industry faces challenges arising from wildlife-related incidents. The province’s natural beauty and diverse wildlife attract millions of visitors each year, however, incidents such as wildlife-vehicle collisions on highways, and bear-human encounters in recreational areas tarnish British Columbia’s reputation as a primer wildlife destination. The Wildlife Collision Prevention Program (WCPP) estimates that roughly 6,100 animals are reported killed in an average year by vehicles in BC, with a further 18,000 animal deaths going unreported. These collisions can be harmful to humans as well, with an average of 570 motorists being injured by animal-vehicle accidents, and three being killed. Therefore, tourists may be determined by safety concerns and negative perceptions of wildlife encounters. As a result, tourists choose to visit alternative destinations with lower risks of conflicts which affect local economies.

In 2017, the CBC reported that there were over 20,000 instances of human-wildlife conflicts, involving conflicts from cougars found in suburbs to bear attacks in parks. This led to nearly 500 bears being killed because of their potential danger to humans. A recent incident near Whistler, British Columbia, has drawn attention to the ongoing issue of human-wildlife conflicts in the region. In 2023, conservation officers are investing a black bear that was caught on camera rummaging through leftovers from a take-out container left unsecured outside a local restaurant. The video footage captured the bear’s behaviour showcasing the risks of wildlife accessing human food sources. The article further highlights concern about the bears becoming habituated to human food sources. The conservation officer Simon Gravel states that “it’s a very optimistic animal and it knows the food is there.” Gravel emphasizes the importance of securing garbage properly to prevent wildlife from accessing it. “We need to make sure people know to put their garbage in a secure location,” Gravel stated. The CBC also reported that Many communities in British Columbia have wilderness areas nearby, and this combination can lead to problems, according to Adam Ford, a biology professor at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. He said, "We don't expect to see a lot of bear conflicts in downtown Vancouver, because that's a lot of ground for a bear to cover, but it's on the outskirts that we see these problems." Ford added that people often want to have close encounters with wildlife, which can be dangerous for both humans and animals. One area where the problem has escalated is the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. Ford mentioned that conflicts arise when people try to have a magical experience with a wolf on Long Beach, doing things they're not supposed to do, such as offering food to the wolf. This causes the wolves to become conditioned to human interaction and handouts, leading to negative outcomes. Chris Doyle, deputy chief with the B.C. Conservation Officers Service reported more than 20,000 human-wildlife conflict reports so far this year, including cougar sightings and bear attacks. Of these, over 14,000 complaints were about black bears, with an additional 1,500 involving cougars and 430 concerning grizzly bears. Mike Badry, wildlife conflict manager with the Ministry of Environment, stated that nearly 500 bears have been destroyed after encounters with humans, including 469 black bears and 27 grizzlies. Furthermore, seven grizzlies were relocated, nine were deterred from interacting with humans, and one cub was sent to a rehabilitation facility. Ford expressed concern about these numbers, stating, "This is a very large-scale problem when you're thinking of that many conflicts over the entire province of B.C. That's not one little isolated incident of someone leaving garbage out." In the same news article, the province said complaints about bears in communities nearly doubled the figure from the same period the year before. Conflicts are common in the summer as bears are trying to fatten up before hibernating for the winter, even if that means rummaging through trash cans. "These bears are trying to put on weight for denning throughout the winter, so they are highly motivated to find food," Badry said. There have been several violent encounters between people and wildlife including recent attacks on hunters. In one case, a grizzly attacked a hunter near the B.C.-Yukon boundary, injuring the man's head and face. The bear was shot and killed by the man's hunting partner, and officers found that the animal was emaciated. A Cranbrook resident was hunting elk in southeast B.C. when he and his son encountered a female bear and her cub. The hunter sustained minor injuries before the bear moved off. Officers determined that the animal had attacked defensively to protect her cub and a food source, so they did not attempt to capture the bear.

Human-wildlife conflicts are complex and multifaceted challenges rear require collaborative efforts within the local communities and innovative solutions. With education, habitat protection and new policies, we can create a future where humans and wildlife thrive side by side in the beautiful landscapes of British Columbia. Let’s keep learning and asking for action to make that future a reality. Being that said, I will now dive into wildlife management. Several initiatives have been launched to promote dialogue and create flexible strategies for achieving sustainable coexistence between humans and wildlife. Community-based conservation projects are a bottom-up approach to addressing human-wildlife conflicts. They involve leveraging local knowledge and participation to develop specific solutions. By involving communities in decision-making and empowering them to take ownership of conservation efforts, these projects foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility towards wildlife and their habitats. For example, initiatives such as community wildlife patrols and habitat restoration programs not only mitigate conflicts but also strengthen social cohesion and resilience within communities. Stakeholder engagement forums provide a platform for various stakeholders including government agencies, conservation organizations, indigenous communities, and industry representatives. They collaboratively identify priorities, share knowledge, and develop consensus-based solutions. These forums facilitate constructive dialogue, bridge divides, and promote collective action toward shared conservation goals. By fostering trust, transparency, and mutual respect among stakeholders, these forums enhance the effectiveness, and legitimacy of conservation efforts and ensure that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. Adaptive management strategies prioritize flexibility and responsiveness in addressing human-wildlife conflicts. These strategies recognize that solutions must evolve in response to changing circumstances and feedback from monitoring and evaluation efforts. They emphasize continuous learning, experimentation, adjustment and enabling wildlife managers to refine their approaches based on empirical evidence and stakeholder input. By embracing innovation and resilience, adaptive management strategies enhance the adaptive capacity of ecosystems and human communities. It’s enabling them to withstand and recover from disturbances while promoting long-term sustainability. Innovative technologies, such as GPS tracking and remote sensing, are revolutionizing wildlife management by providing real-time data on animal movements, habitat use, and population dynamics. These technologies enable researchers and wildlife managers to monitor wildlife behaviour, identify conflict hotspots, and implement targeted interventions with precision and efficiency. By harnessing the power of data-driven decision-making, innovative technologies optimize resource allocation, minimize conflicts, and maximize conservation outcomes. Furthermore, it is essential to foster a culture of respect and understanding towards wildlife to promote coexistence. Education and outreach programs play a crucial role in raising awareness about wildlife behaviour, conflict prevention strategies, and responsible outdoor recreation practices. By instilling empathy, appreciation, and ethical stewardship among the public, these programs cultivate a sense of connection to the natural world and inspire collective action to protect and conserve wildlife and their habitats.

Apart from the director risk of collision, human health is intimately linked with biodiversity and ecosystem health. Biodiversity conservation through the purchase and protection of land is very important in maintaining the healthy ecosystems that we all depend upon. Well-life and struggling in urban environments are a part of this maintaining healthy populations of as many species as possible and that has been significantly important to improve both ecosystem, resilience, and human well-being. The nature trust of BC is passionate about providing wildlife with a place to thrive with those little human interference as possible. Human-wildlife conflicts are often preventable through knowledge of wildlife safety. There are a wide variety of simple things that each of us can do to make a difference in preventing dangerous human life conflicts: interacting barriers to keep wildlife out of gardens, planting vegetation that is not appealing to wildlife. We could also secure compose, not let fruit fall from trees and stay on the lawn, and lastly ensure attics and crawlspaces are sealed and protecting livestock. Additionally, if you happen to experience any dangerous incident, reporting to The Report All Poachers and Polluters (RAPP) hotline is also an option.

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