Preparing for Spring's Emerging Bears

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Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

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"One of the first things that we need to do around our homes is look at what happens when it melts. What's lying around that we forgot when the snow hit? There will be potentially some bird seed that's laying there or some garbage that may have been drug dogs and got covered by snow and this has been a tough winter so there might even be some dead deer under snow banks. All of those things can potentially attract bears into your habitat, right around your home or where you're hiking or whatever. So we need to be especially aware to clean up all that stuff around our homes and especially aware when we're hiking, if we smell or see something dead not to go check it out because a bear might be checking it out at the same time. Those are the key things to do initially. Secondarily is just normal bear safety type information we give people. Be alert to where bears may be, don't surprise them, walk in groups if at all possible, if you've got a dog there are certain areas it should be on a leash or at least under control so it doesn't go bark at a bear and bring it back to you."

Van Daele first came to Kodiak nearly 30 years ago and says the relationship between bears and people has changed dramatically. He remembers a time when any bear that strayed on to the road system or in to town ran the risk of being shot dead. Over time they learned that shooting the bears did nothing to condition them to the reality of living with humans.

"It's easier to understand the bears you live with instead of shooting the ones and then having new ones come in all the time. By educating the bears, by not having attractants we didn't have to shoot as many. Nowadays it's common to have bears on the road system. People on the Buskin River, for instance, they run into bears almost every time they go fishing there. And we don't have a strong cry from the public to go out and shoot bears. We don't have a strong cry from the public say ‘We gotta get rid of these bears and move them,' which we don't do. We don't move bears here in Kodiak. What we have are people calling us up and saying, ‘This idiot did this in front of the bear. Stop that idiot from doing that.' It's a tremendous change in people's attitudes. And of course we in Fish and Game are the managers of the bears, but it's the public's resource so we manage them in a way that the public is comfortable with. Consequently, our management program has changed to be more tolerant of bears, to be more education-oriented instead of trying to shoot everyone that comes around."

Living in bear country has its unique challenges and even seasoned residents can find themselves in a potentially dangerous situation. Van Daele says respect is a big part of learning how to coexist.

"The first time I heard that was from an elder in Old Harbor. ‘If you respect bear, bear will respect you.' It sounds like a nice, touchy-feely new age kind of thing or a traditional Alaska Native elder type thing, but the more you think about it with a Western scientific bend, if you take the time to respect an animal that means you take time to learn about it.

If you take time to learn about the animal, then you're going to act consistently around it. If you act consistently around a critter as smart as a bear, it's going to act consistently around you, not cause as many problems and you're gonna think it respects you. Therefore it really makes sense if you respect bear, bear will respect you."

Van Daele says a good example of Kodiak's mastery of interspecies relations is the bear that roamed around Monashka Bay this winter. The bear had been sighted numerous times near the Wal-Mart and Safeway, but no dangerous encounters were ever reported.