How Much is Too Much? A Different Look at Bear Viewing

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Brigid and Harry Dodge, and their dog Loyal, stand at the head of Uyak Bay on the west side of Kodiak Island. The two have been operating Kodiak Treks, a bear viewing guide service, for about 17 years.

Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

It’s no secret that Kodiak is known for its bears. Each year thousands of tourists flock to the island with the hopes of seeing a famous Kodiak Brown Bear. Some sightings come easily, perhaps along the road system near one of the many salmon rivers that draw the sizable mammals out each summer. Other opportunities to see them are more complex – sighting seeing tours by boat and air, or guided tours through remote parts of the island. Last month KMXT’s Brianna Gibbs explored the latter of those options and sought out the famous bruins on the west side of Kodiak Island.

On a warm, sunny day in June, Brigid and Harry Dodge sit on a grassy hillside at

the head of Uyak Bay. The two are hidden in the tall
grass that surrounds them, eyes glued to binoculars aimed at the winding river feeding
into the bay. They aren’t alone. About 300-yards away, a body emerges from the
river bank.

“You can kind of see its little head out
in the middle of the field.”

A
Kodiak Brown Bear.

“See where you can see the most mud in
the middle of the field here, and then back to the left there’s a bear’s rump.”

Most
hikers wouldn’t be this close to a bear, at least not in an area like Uyak Bay,
where human/bear interaction is little to none. But even near Kodiak proper,
the average hiker would have seen the signs – tuffs of bear fur caught in alder
branches, chewed vegetation, footprints and of course –

“Scat, that’s Bear scat.”

But
the Dodges aren’t your average hikers. As the owners of the bear viewing guide
service, Kodiak Treks, their mission is to see bears.

“So it’s kind of like a kids game a
little bit. You’re trying to see but not be seen. Walking conspicuously, we’re
staying together, we’re walking right along the vegetation line so we’re not out
silhouetting ourselves. And I’m usually out ahead just thinking about watching
the clouds and looking for scat, seeing what they’re eating, in that one I saw
the pushki, and that gives us more information. So there’s tons and tons of
bear sign in the woods out here.”

But
more than that, the Dodges want to see bears in their natural environment,
without disturbing them. To do that, patrons must first charter a plane to the
Dodge’s base camp on Aleut
Island.

The camp is about 10 miles south of Larsen Bay village, home of the oldest remaining cannery on Kodiak. Much of Lower Uyak is speckled with commercial fishing set net sites, but few of those spread to Upper Uyak. And none to the head of the bay.

The Dodge's base camp on Aleut Island in Uyak Bay. Most of their excursions involve camping overnight in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, but often visitors will spend a night or two here.

In fact, the Dodges quaint compound is the southernmost encampment. And even then it still a 10 mile skiff ride to reach the head of Uyak Bay, which lies in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge.

And to get to the grassy hillside, one of the Dodges’ favorite bear viewing spots, is another mile and a half hike along the coast and up into bear country.

It’s definitely a process, and not necessarily a trip for everyone, but if you ask the Dodges, that’s OK. Limited access and foot travel keeps their trips low impact, and means less stress on the bears they watch. Brigid said it’s definitely a different approach to guiding, but one she and Harry feel good about.

“This is, we’re trying to develop a Kodiak model, that works for us, that’s sustainable, where we don’t change what we’re doing, where we’re doing something different from what other people are doing, where we attract the right type of people that want the same thing that we have.”

“But it’s complex, you know, that’s our perspective. We like to invite people from the refuge to come out and do a trip with us so they can see what’s possible.”

Kodiak Treks has been operating for about 17 years, but Harry has been guiding around bears for more than 35 years. He and Brigid try to infuse their trips with education, including historical anecdotes about the people of Kodiak and traditional interactions with bears.

“The Native hunters wouldn’t even talk about bears. They thought that bears could read people’s thoughts. So when they

were preparing for a hunt, rather than say bear they’d say the old man, or great one, and bragging was not something they did. And they wouldn’t discuss the hunt with other people. So it’s much different than today, where bragging is, a lot of that.”

The trips involve staying invisible to the bears, both to allow for the best viewing, and to make sure the presence of humans won’t put unnatural stress on the animals. Brigid said it isn’t the most convenient way to view bears, but in her opinion, it is the most sustainable. The goal, of course, is to see bears, but that doesn’t necessarily mean getting close enough to snap a photograph.

“So we’re very happy when people get photos of bears, but if it comes to choosing between displacing a bear and getting a photograph, they’re not going to get photograph.”

She said most people don’t want to harm the bears, and once they understand that harm can come from simply being there, they understand why Brigid and Harry put certain limits on their excursions.

“You just have to help people figure out what works well, and I think most people want to minimize impact.”

The Dodge's approach to bear viewing, and the success of Kodiak Treks over the years, is just one example of the growing market of eco tourism. Brigid said she’s happy more people are taking a closer look at the impacts of their travels, especially on wildlife-rich places like Kodiak. Still, she said she does worry about the growing fascination with bears, and what more tourists might mean for the health and safety of the animals.

"So it’s hard to fill Alaska’s desire for tourism to generate revenue, and jobs. Those are two different things. We try to come from the other direction, not an economic model, but a, our barometer is can we insert ourselves here? The world is fascinated by bears and we’re well positioned to sort of mediate between what bears need and what people want.”