

## **Strengthening the human-bear system**

**Local perspectives on a bear hazard assessment for Whitehorse  
April, 2016**

The Whitehorse Bear Working Group commissioned a study of risks to humans and bears in the Whitehorse area in 2015. The study examined the availability and relative quality of natural and non-natural bear attractants, as well as the historical record of negative human-bear incidents in all neighborhoods and a representative sample of schools, trails, industrial areas and campgrounds. The accompanying recommendations identify actions which may reduce human-bear conflict in the community.

Following the release of the study the working group hosted a focused discussion about the study's recommendations. Our aim was to draw on local expertise and resources to determine the relevance of the recommendations at this time and to identify key players and priority actions.

Prior to the workshop and in order to facilitate a focused discussion we grouped the recommendations into three themes. Each session focused on one of these themes and followed the same process. We worked through objective, reflective and interpretive questioning before approaching the decisional (what, why, who and when). We identified more than twenty things that are currently being done to address human-bear conflict, both as government and non-government initiatives. The following is a review of what we heard throughout the day and what was written by each group during the decisional question processes.

### **Waste management**

Waste management planning requires careful, long-term consideration and may place high demands on individual and government resources. The waste management session drew the greatest attendance of the three themes (25 participants) and generated the most discussion. Most participants demonstrated a good understanding of the problem and expressed a high level of support for reducing human-bear conflict through waste

*Workshop participants wrote their ideas and suggestions on paper tablecloths and summarized the discussion within their groups at the end of each session in a 5-10 minute presentation to the entire group. Many of the comments are recorded [here](#).*

*Why address waste management?*

*"For human safety, bear conservation and personal property protection."*

*“There is a need for direction from decision makers.”*

*“The City must determine how realistic changes are with current funds & infrastructure.”*

*“Bylaws should be standardized and drafting should involve First Nations, the City [of Whitehorse] and WildWise Yukon.”*

*“Bear proof bins for businesses and institutions now, residences can be replaced when existing infrastructure ages.”*

*“Explore partnerships between different levels of government for funding and support to implement waste management recommendations (i.e. territorial funds for bear safe capital projects – “demonstration” fund).”*

*“Apply the Wildlife Act and fine homeowners & businesses that attract wildlife within municipal boundaries”*

*“Garbage sheds should be built to bear-resistant specifications [bylaw].”*

*“Additional enforcement staff is needed at the City and YG.”*

*“Enforce with fines.”*

management, recognizing that this approach will result in the greatest benefits.

The Wildlife Act currently directs responsibility for enforcement to Yukon Government, however, personal mismanagement of household and industrial wastes on municipal lands often results in harm to wildlife, making enforcement roles both unclear and difficult to carry out. Because collection and disposal of residential and commercial wastes is a municipal government responsibility discussion within the groups reflected a heavy emphasis on the need for direction from decision makers, collaboration between governments and clearly defined enforcement roles. The ideas and suggestions presented can be divided between two themes, those which identify government as the lead and those which may be addressed within the community (NGOs, businesses, educational institutions etc.)

Bylaws were identified as a primary instrument in need of standardization and updating. The City of Whitehorse undertakes a regular bylaw review which offers enables an ‘upgrade’ to current bylaws and the integration of best practices as they evolve. WildWise Yukon, as part of the Whitehorse Bear Working Group, submitted a comprehensive list of recommended changes to the existing bylaw in the fall of 2015 and discussion continues within the group to determine the potential of bylaw changes in reducing human-bear conflict. We heard from some participants that this approach is a necessary precursor to integrating a new waste management system, however, many feel that placing the emphasis on personal responsibility through enforcement cannot stand alone and may result in both pushback from Whitehorse residents and overburden on City enforcement staff. One group identified the need to integrate bear-proof waste systems into the solid waste management plan and to include upgrades to the electric fencing at the Whitehorse landfill in the City’s solid waste permit.

While Yukon Government is responsible for enforcement of the Wildlife Act, the Act states that residents may not be charged with an offense if their garbage is stored in a receptacle approved and provided by the City. Bylaws could be amended to clarify appropriate use and storage of those receptacles as a step towards decreasing the volume of attractants available to bears and increasing the City’s ability to enforce improper use.

The Whitehorse Bear Working Group is a relatively new partnership between the City, Yukon Government and WildWise Yukon and may play a key role in identifying means of collaboration and of clarifying enforcement roles. One group suggested that the working group should develop a “roadmap and timeline” of actions and should expand their membership and scope over time.

Most groups steered away from conversation about a new waste management system. City officials expressed concerns about operations and maintenance, as well as capital costs, which vary considerably depending on which system is being considered. Other participants suggested making a new system a budget item for the next budget cycle. One participant suggested that more stewardship and extended producer responsibility programs developed by the territorial government would mean that more resources for waste management may become available for use by the City. Tires and drinking containers are examples of products which have disposal fees at the point of purchase. Other provinces have upwards of 30 programs, which drastically reduce the financial strain on municipalities dealing with waste. Another suggested that the City of Whitehorse and Kwanlin Dun First Nation pool resources and develop a standardized waste system. With relatively little time dedicated to sharing ideas, these suggestions reflect an understanding of the need to reduce human-bear conflict, willingness among key stakeholders to collaborate and possibly the capacity within governments to effect change.

Alongside the discussion about government responsibilities, participants identified community-driven actions, often considered easier wins than those requiring high level decision making. Discussion focused mostly on providing education within the community and promoting personal accountability. Yukon College and Environment Yukon’s Y2C2 program both have student populations which could be engaged for installation, monitoring, maintenance and community education projects. Kwanlin Dun First Nation and the Ta’an Kwach’an Council employ wildlife monitors who are able to share information about wildlife with governments and the public. Renewable Resource Council members felt that helping people to understand how bears behave and what their needs are on the land will help residents respect bylaws which aim to reduce harm to the human-bear system.

Further, groups identified that finding the budget for rural community bear resistant waste ‘centres’, campground food containers and

*“Identify site-specific problems and include residents in solution planning.”*

*“Focus on personal accountability for waste management & creating bear safe neighborhoods.”*

*“Partnering opportunities with Yukon College – students could be part of long term monitoring of trails and bear proof waste systems.”*

*“[First Nation] wildlife monitors are in a good position to provide bear education and can draw on existing programs and expand their reach.”*

*“Educating individuals and private companies [is a] high priority. Bear education groups should target and distribute information with stakeholders.”*

*“Encourage waste management providers [haulers] to stock bear proof containers.”*

## ***Why discuss agriculture & landscaping?***

*“Promoting bear-wise practices supports the City’s Sustainability Plan, promotes personal responsibility and protects personal property.”*

*“We want to have human-bear safety AND local edibles in green spaces and yards.”*

*“Promote solar powered electric fencing at community gardens.”*

*“Education initiatives need a funding partner.”*

website updates about local bear sightings and waste and safety issues are all easy wins.

## **Agriculture & landscaping**

Four recommendations fell within ‘agriculture and landscaping’ and three out of the four are identified in the bear hazard assessment as moderate priority. The groups addressing this theme quickly came to understand the opportunity to reduce human-bear conflict by reducing the amount of natural attractants made available to bears in human-dominated areas and engaged in problem solving conversation, identifying easy wins and project champions.

A number of tree, shrub and berry species have been used in the Whitehorse area both by the City, as ornamental landscaping, and by residents as food producers. Removing existing bear-attracting landscaping is an unpopular idea across the board. City workers noted that this would be an inefficient use of funds but that planning for the use of non-attracting species in future and using human-bear conflict maps to avoid using attracting species in high incident areas may be possible. . Backyard farming and landscaping may pose a greater challenge, requiring education on the merits of electric fencing and thoughtful placement of known bear-attractants and, ultimately, investment by individuals and community initiatives. The City’s Sustainability Plan and many local NGO’s promote food security by encouraging small scale food production and any attempt to reduce human-bear conflict will have to be careful not to undermine these initiatives and, rather, to include their promoters in planning for safer communities for both humans and bears.

Community gardens may present an opportunity for education en masse through demonstration and use of electric fencing and netting and harvesting initiatives which reduce the amount of ripe food available to bears. Non-government organizations such as the Arctic Institute for Community Based Research and the Elder Active group at Sport Yukon may be able to mobilize youth, seniors and other groups to undertake harvest projects.

Education became a central focus of these discussions. Participants identified easy wins through the use of trail head and community signage, mail-outs and promotion through the City of Whitehorse and bear working group partners and the use of schools, youth and

culture camps as a means of sharing information. One group identified bylaw as a key way to support momentum, however, others did not think that Whitehorse residents would be responsive to more imposed rules.

Renewable Resource Council members shared information about the use of fire and smoke, dogs, noise, bear harvest and ceremonial take of grizzlies as bear deterrents in First Nations communities. They also suggested that the use of a bin loaner program for salmon would help secure food at fish camps when attractants are most available and in peoples' yards year round.

The agriculture and landscaping discussion was both positive and productive. Participants contributed valuable suggestions and said that they had a greater understanding of how to protect both our food resources and bears together.

*“Look at our resources and change what we can right now.”*

*“Why discuss trails and other shared spaces?”*

*“To keep children and wildlife safe.”*

*“Safety for people and wildlife.”*

*“For the safety of trail users and wildlife.”*

*“Place signage and brochures at strategic locations.”*

*“Conduct trail audits on trails with high rates of encounters or sightings.”*

## **Trails and other shared spaces**

Another four recommendations fell within the trails and other shared spaces theme. Three were ranked as moderate and one as high priority. One group worked on these recommendations and addressed schools, campgrounds, trails and other shared spaces separately.

One theme that emerges from the discussions within each of these categories is the need for more information. Participants working in the school system noted that more information about how to increase awareness about waste management would help school administration and councils implement bear-safe programs. Summer is a good time to provide information while teachers are designing curricula and administration is organizing programs for the following year.

Campgrounds were identified as an important place to provide education opportunities for staff, tourists and locals. The group suggested that WildWise and campground staff could work together to identify the short and long term wins and immediate solutions. This should happen now.

Whitehorse is criss-crossed with trail systems that are used by hikers, runners, cyclers, off-road vehicle users, skiers, dog walkers and other enthusiasts. Cleared trails are often lined with bear attractants such as soapberry, which thrives in open forest and also provide as easy a navigation system for bears as they do for humans. Trails are loaded with potential for negative human-bear encounters, particularly for those travelling at high speeds and tuned in to ipods and cell phones. Trails also provide an excellent opportunity to share bear safety information with a group of people who need it and to establish an interpretive learning environment. Past studies have identified that people learn and retain information best in their own communities and where the information provided is locally relevant.

WildWise Yukon and Yukon College have been working on messaging for trail signs and aim to have a finished product which can be adapted to a variety of trail systems by mid-summer. The group identified an opportunity for City Parks, Environment Yukon and WildWise to work together to identify trails with the greatest risk. Likewise, participants noted a need to identify high risk areas

in all four categories (schools, campgrounds, trails and other shared spaces) area by area in order to prioritize actions appropriately.

## **In Conclusion**

Participants of the Bear Hazard Assessment workshop felt that this day of consultation and idea sharing revealed willingness and ability for government and the community to address many of the recommendations in the Whitehorse Bear Hazard Assessment. Below is a list of priority actions that were discussed amongst the stakeholders.

1. Amend bylaws to support appropriate use and storage of existing residential waste.
2. Develop a roadmap of other actions in partnership with the Whitehorse Bear Working Group.
3. Organize fall harvest of fruit trees and shrubs within neighborhoods and community gardens.
4. Investigate the use of non-fruit bearing trees and shrubs (and other bear attractants) for city landscaping, especially in areas that are known to have human-bear incidences, and promote the same for all residents through City and YG publications.
5. Mainstream the use of electric fencing through education opportunities offered by WildWise Yukon, community garden associations and Yukon Government.
6. Provide information to schools about attractant management.
7. Identify high use and high human-bear encounter areas and erect bear safety signage and identify trails for interpretive panels to educate public about bear behavior and ecology.
8. Continue the work of the Whitehorse Bear Working Group to support clarification of enforcement roles and integration of a bear-wise solid waste management plan.

Thank you to the following people and organizations for your participation and insights:

Shannon Clohosey, Manfred Hoefs, Norm Anderson, Testloa Smith, Blue Bin Recycling Society, Dave Pruden, Scott Gilbert, Tom Wyers, Michelle Sicotte, Graham Van Tighem, Tecla Van Bussel, Robert Service Campground staff, Miles Hume, Shannon Trott, Dave Bakica, John Pattimore, Wendy Nixon, Randy Lamb, Alain Fontaine, Ramona Maraj, Katherine Thiesenhausen, Matt Larsen, Doug Hnatiuk, City Parks and Cathy Small.

And to our fearless facilitator, Nansi Cunningham, for leading us through a focused conversation which will lead us to more conversation and, eventually, a stronger human-bear system.