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Bears, Place-making, and Authenticity in British Columbia

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ABSTRACT: Extreme sports, adventure, and ecotourism are bringing increasing numbers of people into remote backcountry areas worldwide. The number of people visiting wilderness areas is set to increase further, and nature tourism is the fastest growing sector in the $3.5 trillion global annual tourism market (Mehmetoglu 2006). What impacts will this have on the social perceptions, economic, and conservation values of these areas and the species that are found there? Reflecting on over a decade's research on the impacts of the bear-viewing (*Ursus* spp.) ecotourism industry in British Columbia, Canada, this paper considers authenticity, place, and 'place making' via a case study of bear tourism in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada.

Index terms: authenticity, brown bear, ecotourism, semiotics, wilderness

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the argument that it is the experience of encountering a bear (*Ursus* spp.), which defines the sense of place for the ecotourist. Many tourists who have encountered bears in heavily impacted secondary forest describe the place as 'pristine' or 'wilderness' (Swain 2006), while the location would not fulfil the conventional definitions of either of these terms. As Clapp (2004:846) notes, 'The Great Bear Rainforest' of B.C. is wilderness in that it is a "landscape hospitable to species excluded from modern industrial human settlements."

Nature-based tourism (such as bear-viewing) covers a wide range of experiences and activities, and while it is difficult to generalize, it is typically about purchasing *experiences* rather than *things*, with particular emphasis on photographic tourism (Lemelin 2006). The market for nature-based tourism is increasing faster than traditional tourism at rates of 10% – 30% per annum (Mehmetoglu 2006). In some countries, notably Costa Rica, it has become the leading foreign exchange earner (Reynolds and Braithwaite 2001). Current nature tourism demands are centered on North America and Europe (Wight 2001), with the greatest number of nature tourists coming from the United States, the U.K., and Germany (Eagles and Higgins 1998). As Saarinen (2006) notes, nature-based tourism (as a subset of ecotourism) is based on the concept of sustainable development, which, while problematic, ideologically and politically still provides a platform on which different stakeholders in tourism can interact, negotiate, and reflect on their actions' consequences for the environment.

In B.C., bear-viewing is centered on the North and Central Coasts of the province, which falls within the Humid Maritime and Highland Ecodivision (Demarchi 2004), an area of temperate climate and high rainfall, especially in the winter months. It is a rugged, largely mountainous region typified by steep terrain, long fjords, and glaciated valleys. The landscape is extensively covered by old-growth forest (> 250 years old) and it contains the world's largest tracts of intact temperate rainforest (Coast Information Team 2004). Most importantly for grizzly (brown) bears (*Ursus arctos* Linn.), its rivers support major populations of six species of salmon: chinook (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha* Walbaum); chum (*O. keta* Walbaum); coho (*O. kisutch* Walbaum); pink (*O. gorbuscha* Walbaum); sockeye (*O. nerka* Walbaum); and steelhead (*O. mykiss* Walbaum) (Wood 2000). This landscape is, however, simultaneously an industrial center and a 'wilderness' (Clapp 2004). There are salmon canneries and pulp mills alongside the old-growth temperate rainforest and alpine meadows.

The changing social and economic value of these 'wilderness' ecosystems has the potential to influence land planning, resource extraction, and conservation decision-making (Swain 2006). The presence of tourists, their expectations and perceptions, can also affect the conservation value of the landscape through their consumption of specific species. In the following sections, we briefly outline the history, characteristics, and economics of the bear-viewing industry in North America, before then considering bear-viewing, the tourist gaze, and the construction of place.

The Grizzly Bear-viewing Industry: An Overview

The history of managed bear-viewing in

North America began with the establishment of McNeil River Game Sanctuary in Coastal Alaska, 1963. Subsequently, many more areas in North America opened up for bear-viewing, driven by considerable public demand (Aumiller and Matt 1994; Fagen and Fagen 1994; Olson and Gilbert 1994). Sites are typically located on salmon streams, with high quality habitat in surrounding areas allowing for both a high local population of bears and a concentration of their activities at certain times of the year (Aumiller and Matt 1994). Many sites have, or have previously had, conflicting use with recreational fisheries or hunting (Crupi, unpubl. data; Wilker and Barnes 1998; Smith 2002; Tollefson et al. 2005) and similar conflicts are prominent in B.C. (Parker and Gorter 2003).

The industry is relatively young in B.C., being largely non-existent before the mid-1990s. For example, in 2006 most operators had been in the bear-viewing business for an average of 10 years (Swain 2006). With the establishment of the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary (KGBS) north of Prince Rupert in 1994, bear-viewing was given a considerable marketing boost and in the following 10 years, the industry saw marked growth. In 1995, the average operator took out 26 clients per year; this had increased to 564 by 2005 (Swain 2006). While the industry as a whole provided approximately 17,000 client-days of bear-viewing in 2005, there were still fewer than 20 operators whose primary business was bear-viewing (Swain 2006). On the whole, these are small businesses with the average operator reporting 23.1 person-months per year of employment (equivalent to just under two full time staff, although given the seasonal nature of the industry, there are very few full time posts).

The number of operators in B.C. remains relatively small compared to the tourism industry as a whole; the largest lodge has a capacity of 30 guests, and the largest day-trip can accommodate 38 clients at one time. This size of operation is, however, typical of the area's other tourism operators (B.C. Ministry of Small Business 2000). Due to the low tolerance of bears to disturbance, the operator's businesses must remain small; indeed, some may have already encountered reductions of their viewing success rate through unsustainable use of their resource (Nevin and Gilbert 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Nevin et al. 2001; Nevin 2003). In this case, two of the major operators in the area indicate that the number of commercial boats arriving to view bears is resulting in crowding at times, and a loss of the sense of wilderness; this not only has the potential to negatively impact wildlife, but also to affect the very thing which the bear-viewers value – an encounter with a large carnivore in the wild.

The British Columbia government economic data and industry profiles (known as 'building blocks') provide estimates for commercial recreation lodges (B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management 2003a) and suggest an average annual gross revenue of $614,300. Swain's (2006) study would suggest that the average revenue for bear-viewing lodges is a little higher, at $844,610, a similar finding to another economic study of lodges on the north coast (The Economic Planning Group 2003). This suggests that specialty wildlife-viewing lodges may be more able to market their products, effectively raising revenues above those of other backcountry recreation facilities.

The building blocks also speak of the 'huge' potential size of the market in the United States (B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management 2003a), and describes the profile as 50% baby boomers (a North American term denoting those people born between 1946 and 1964) and 75% from the United States and Canada; yet operators suggest they see a U.S. and Canadian combined market share of only 19% (Swain 2006). So, while the building blocks may be an appropriate tool for a straightforward economic projection, the suggestions of market profiles are questionable. Additionally, the corresponding demands and trends are heavily biased towards the baby boomers, which may not be appropriate in a U.K. or other European context as that generation may be very different from its North American counterparts.

The Economics of Bear-viewing

The land-use planning process in B.C. emphasizes market economic values and largely favors production forestry as the 'base case' scenario (B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management 2004). However, the recognition of other non-market values such as biodiversity, recreation, and ecosystem services has started to gain a greater role in all levels of planning in B.C., from the regional down to the watershed level (Parker and Gorter 2003; Swain 2006). We would argue that when considering land-use planning at a watershed level and its impacts on broad-scale efforts to preserve biodiversity on the Central and North Coasts of B.C., commercial grizzly bear-viewing has the potential to contribute enough fiscal value to offset lost forest production.

Some studies (van Kooten and Bulte 1999; Smith 2001; Parker and Gorter 2003; Swain 2006) suggest that bear-viewing could add significant value to the landscape and become an important source of tourist revenue in B.C. For example, Smith (based on an extrapolation of Tourism B.C. data that indicates a 32% growth rate in wilderness tourism in B.C. from 2001 to 2005) projects that the value of the bear-viewing industry in 2015 would be $16 million, and in 2025, $32 million, (Smith 2010).

Moreover, bear-viewing is unusual when compared to other wilderness recreation in that it is discretely measurable through the permitting process at a watershed level and is generally a high-value tourism product (Swain 2006). By comparison, coastal tourism is often boat-based or otherwise involves travel over extensive areas using helicopters to support fly-fishing, sea kayaking, or backpacking. As these activities are diffuse and spread out over many square kilometers, value per hectare is low when compared to extractive industries such as forestry (for example, the value of logging old-growth forests is around $15,000 per hectare). Similarly, contingent valuation has added non-market values to wilderness landscape that are trivial (less than $100 per hectare) on the watershed scale (Reid et al. 1995; B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management 2003b).

In the United States, the Alaskan bear-viewing experience indicates a large market for bear-viewing, providing $3 million in

annual revenues in combined fishing and bear-viewing experiences through an estimated 9000 visitors each year (Tollefson et al. 2005). For example, the well-known Brooks River in Katmai National Park lists 40 plane operators offering access and more than 10,000 visitors annually (Olson et al. 1997).

Bear-viewing and the Tourism Gaze

As Urry (2002:1) notes, tourists are motivated to "gaze upon or view a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary." Almost inevitably this means travelling to increasingly exotic and far-flung locations, and such experiences frequently include natural spaces and wild animals (Curtin 2005). Our research suggests that it is the presence of the animal, rather than the naturalness of the place, which lends the sense of being 'out of the ordinary' as exemplified by historic dump-based bear-viewing in Yellowstone National Park (Biel 2006; Haroldson et al. 2008). Tourists flocked to observe bears (and protested heavily when this practice was stopped) despite the less than natural setting.

In terms of the perceived (authentic) value of bears and their habitat, there is a good deal of literature pertaining to tourism and authenticity (MacCannell 1973; Wang 1999; Olsen 2002; Steiner and Reisinger 2006; Kim and Jamal 2007; Mantecón and Huete 2008; Kolar and Zabkar 2010; Brown 2013) and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review this complex and increasingly contested literature thoroughly. However, Wang (1999:349) notes how the usefulness and validity of the 'authentic' has been questioned because many tourist motivations or experiences cannot be explained in terms of the conventional concept of authenticity. As Urry (1991:51) states, "the search for authenticity is too simple a foundation for explaining contemporary tourism." Nevertheless, authenticity is relevant to some kinds of tourism, particularly those which involve the representation of the 'Other' or of the past (Wang 1999). We would argue that nature tourism also involves a search for authenticity, but that this involves a blurring of what Wang (1999:351) refers to as the separate entities of 'existential authenticity' and 'symbolic authenticity.' In this regard, we follow the postmodernist position of Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and acknowledge the fragmentation and blurred boundaries of authenticity rather than the modernist tendency to create binary and/or exclusivist positions (e.g., authentic/inauthentic; object/existence; commodity/culture).

In our emergent conceptualization of nature authenticity, the projection of expectations and imaginings onto toured objects, in this case bears, interacts with the emotional experience of the real self. In such a scenario, it is possible to positively influence tourist existential experiences by offering them authentic artifacts (Kolar and Zabkar 2010). To some extent, nature tourists are searching for an experience which is both object and existentially authentic. They are essentially semioticians (Urry 2002), searching for markers and signs to facilitate authenticity. In the context of the bear-viewing ecotourist, the bear is the sign that authenticates the experience of wilderness rather than any characteristic of the landscape itself.

This is important because for some time now B.C. has based its international marketing on the concept of wilderness and wildlife. Best known for the "Super Natural British Columbia" marketing effort in the early 1990s, the official website continues to rely on images of wildlife, outdoor adventure, and wilderness as key selling features of the Province. It is reasonable to suggest that larger portions of tourists are, in fact, drawn by nature-related motivations and a desire to experience a sense of wilderness. Notions of wildness are, however, inherently subjective (Convery and Dutson 2007). As Saarinen (1998) argues, the memories and feelings of individuals combine with their concrete observations to create the experience of a wilderness. Thus, wilderness is 'a state of mind,' an experience of 'nature authenticity.' Biel (2006) also questions the line between cultural and natural landscapes, and suggests that bears (in Yellowstone) fulfill a role as representations of nature (see also Dombrowski 2002). Citing the Leopold Report, which significantly changed National Park Management in the United States during the 1960s, she states that American parks were remodelled to look natural, a 'reasonable illusion of primitive America,' with signs and traces of management efforts concealed from the public, 'much as scene production is achieved at Disneyland.' This was the advent of the 'wilderness bear' (Biel 2006:88). It is clear, therefore, that understanding the way that meaning is socially negotiated and contested is necessary for effective landscape management (Williams 2000) and, ultimately, for constructing 'place.'

The act of viewing bears in their natural setting, interacting with wildlife in close proximity, is a highly important aspect of the tourist experience (Lemelin 2006). Much of what motivates the nature tourist is captured in the concept of sense of place in that the setting of the bear encounter often adds greatly to the perceived value of the experience (Williams et al. 1992). As Biel (2006) indicates, their meaning and significance far outweighs their simple presence. As we will discuss in the following section, the experience of viewing bears creates sense of place for many tourists, with the bears occupying a pivotal role as place makers and facilitators of nature authenticity.

Bear-viewing, in particular, tends to attract a subset of dedicated, though poorly studied, wildlife tourists. In the following section, we discuss the first attitudinal study of nature-based tourism in B.C. (completed by one of the authors, Peter Swain, in 2006). The research focused in particular on the motivations of bear viewers and the sector perspectives of tourism operators.

B.C. Case Study

The study included all commercial grizzly bear-viewing operations in the Province; black bear (*U. americanus* Pallas) viewing was excluded due to a lack of dedicated operators. The final research design was influenced heavily by research approaches to cultural tourism (Stanley et al. 2000) as visitation to special events bore some resemblance to the motivational aspects of specialty bear-viewing.

A total of 236 participants responded to the survey. Of these 236, 33% would have

chosen another country or province for their trip had bear-viewing not been available; a further 14% would have chosen another region within the province. Ninety-six percent of respondents claimed viewing bears was important, or very important, in deciding to visit B.C. Although initially surprising, the high number may be a result of advertising. British Columbia has long relied on its natural heritage to 'sell' the province overseas, and animals such as grizzly bears, killer whales *Orcinus orca* (Linneaus 1758), and bald eagles *Haliaeetus lucocephalus* (Linneaus 1758) have been prominent in the visual images used in advertising. Furthermore, the opportunities to view wildlife were very important for respondents in terms of selecting a vacation destination, and the importance of bear-viewing opportunities to their current vacation destination choice was found to be considerable. Almost all participants had booked their bear-viewing experience before leaving on their vacation. These are clearly tourists specifically motivated by the opportunity to watch bears. In terms of nationality, 55% of the respondents were from the U.K., 16% from the United States and Canada, and 10% from Australia and New Zealand, with other Europeans and Scandinavians making up the remaining 17%. This corresponds reasonably well with other studies of nature tourists (as discussed earlier).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the research identified that the most important factor for establishing successful bear-viewing operations was reliability of seeing bears; however, with the bear comes the landscape and the sense of place.

The research also included a survey for bear-viewing operators, and findings suggest that while commercial bear-viewing requires considerable concessions from extractive users (forestry and hunting), in a multi-stakeholder scenario these may be warranted because of the socio-economic benefits it provides. Furthermore, bear-viewing is also possible in areas of secondary (degraded) forest. Operators were asked to rank a range of impacts on their business on an ordinal ranking scale of 1 (very positive) to 5 (very negative). Areas of secondary forest or partial retention forestry (classed as 'visible forestry partial retention cuts'), where loggers select the highest grade trees and leave the rest, were ranked as having a positive impact on business. In such areas, logging operations have less visual impact than more traditional clear fell forestry. From the supply side, this suggests that bear-viewing operators do not object to logging itself, but do require their needs to be considered within broader forest management. It is also likely that operators are using forestry infrastructure, such as roads, for viewing. From the demand side, this also supports the argument that bears create place, as tourists who had viewed bears in secondary forest frequently described the environment as 'pristine' or 'wilderness.'

This finding is based on Swain's B.C. case study, but is also a product of over 10 years of observation and research linked to bear-viewing in B.C. Sitting with tourists in a lodge after a day of bear-viewing (in secondary forest), the conversation would usually go something like this:

Tourist 1: it was amazing to see bears in a true wilderness; ***Researcher:*** is that how you imagined a wilderness landscape would look? ***Tourist 1:*** oh yes, but seeing the bears made the whole experience real, it made me think how lucky I was to be in their environment; ***Tourist 2:*** I've never been to such a wild place, that's how things looked before humans starting trashing the planet; ***Researcher:*** but what about the (logging) roads we used to drive close to the bears? ***Tourist 1:*** well, that was necessary to get us there, but once we were there and we saw the bears, that was remote; that was wilderness all right.

The researchers found that by sitting at the end of a day and having a beer with tourists (some of whom were survey participants), they were able to gather remarkably candid observations and thoughts. These observations also fit with Biel's (2006) argument that people's ideal image of a bear has less to do with what people actually see, and is more about a general fuzzy image of what a bear in the wild is supposed to look like and do.

Our research suggests that the characteristics of bear-viewing operations mean that they can be successful/authentic in both pristine and modified/managed landscapes. This may be the case even in areas that have been severely compromised by logging, and bear-viewing operations may also play a role in preserving remaining stands of old growth timber. This links well to other research in B.C., where a combination of partial retention forestry and tourism has been shown to be an efficient land-use option (B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management 2003c). Bear-viewing also adds to an economic argument against clear felling and/or the removal of old growth forest stands.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of bear-viewing in British Columbia highlights the gap which often lies between perceived and real 'values' of a landscape. From a social constructionist perspective, the wilderness does not exist without an observer who experiences it (Saarinen 1998). As Biel (2006) memorably puts it, the bear of the imagination wanders a landscape of the mind waiting to enter the landscape of the eye. Understanding the motivation of the traveller can clearly be a powerful tool for accurately assessing the value of the landscape they visit. As a semiotician, the tourist reads the landscape, searching for signifiers of place (Urry 2002). In this paper we have argued that, to some extent, bears create place by acting as the signifiers of wilderness. In terms of landscape perception, the implications are that tourists may view a landscape as authentic ('nature authenticity') and/or pristine as long as landscape signifiers are present. As Kolar and Zabkar (2010) note, if authenticity is a socially and individually constructed experience, tourism managers can influence authenticity. The landscape is, thus, authentic to a tourist even though it may be severely degraded, because the presence of bears signifies wild nature. Intriguingly, Steiner and Reisinger (2006:313) also argue that tourists trying to be authentic are likely to be far less demanding and far more forgiving than mass tourists, who 'need their every whim catered for.'

Understanding tourist preferences and expectations better can, thus, inform the

development of wilderness tourism activities that are sensitive to, and potentially benefit, the ecosystem, and in the process create a sense of place. In B.C., bear-viewing could add significant economic value to the landscape as it can be successful (and authentic) in both pristine and modified/managed landscapes.

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Owen T. Nevin is currently the Dean of the School of Graduate Research at CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia. Before joining CQUniversity, Professor Nevin was the Head of the National School of Forestry at the University of Cumbria in the U.K. He had previously held positions as Programme Director for Conservation Biology at the University of Cumbria and University of Central Lancashire.

His background is in behavioural ecology and he holds a BSc (Hons) in Biology and Ecology from the University of East Anglia (UK) and a PhD in Wildlife Ecology from Utah State University (USA). Owen's research portfolio revolves around the application of behavioural insights in the management and conservation of animals and their habitats, especially where human activities have impacts on the behaviours in question.

Owen is a population and behavioural ecologist specializing in large carnivores. Much of his research work has been focused around advancing the conservation of bears and their habitats through developing better management and understanding of bears, bear-viewing ecotourism, and resource exploitation (fisheries and forestry) in the ecosystems of the Great Bear Rainforest. In conducting this work, he has applied a combination of behavioural, spatial, and economic tools to gain novel insights into population processes. Techniques applied in these studies range from satellite telemetry and spatial modelling, through remote camera trapping and genetic sampling, to direct ethological observation. A long-term study (ongoing since 1997) of the brown bear population in the Glendale region of Knight Inlet, British Columbia, is delivering opportunities to understand interactions across a generational scale in these long-lived animals.

Owen has applied many of the lessons learned in the Glendale population to the management of problem wildlife and conservation of carnivores in other regions around the world. This is not restricted to bears, and recently he has applied GPS telemetry techniques and behaviourally spatial modelling to invasive grey squirrel populations in the United Kingdom.

Peter Swain, M.S., is currently Head of Visitor Services for South East Alberta Provincial Parks. He completed a Masters by Research at the University of Central Lancashire where his research ('The value of watchable wildlife: measuring the impacts of bear-viewing in British Columbia') was supervised by Dr. Owen Nevin. He has worked extensively as a naturalist guide in Western Canada and was General Manager of Knight Inlet Lodge, Canada's premier bear-viewing destination.

Dr. Ian Convery is a Reader in Conservation and Forestry in the National School of Forestry, University of Cumbria. His main research interests are related to community resource use and place studies, with a particular focus on conservation and nature.

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