

Not Just Any Bears

FEW PLACES ARE AS PRISTINE AND LITTLE KNOWN AS KAMCHATKA **BY GLEB RAYGORODETSKY**



GLEB RAYGORODETSKY (2)

“THEN HUNDREDS OF brown bears must be killed illegally around Kamchatka every year,” Roman Adukanov said with a sigh, carefully folding his notebook and rising from the desk.

We had just finished tallying the results of a year-long study of poaching around Bystrinsky Nature Park, at the heart of the Kamchatka Peninsula in eastern Russia. Interviews with hunters, reindeer herders and fishermen had documented more than 100 incidents of fish and wildlife poaching by the residents of one of the two communities within the protected area. We learned that on the bears’ forays through their hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding grounds, residents illegally killed 28 of them. These are the largest brown bears in Eurasia, with males reaching close to ten feet and weighing more than 1,000 pounds.

Nobody is certain how many brown bears live on the peninsula. Estimates range from 6,000 to 20,000. Yet, the De-

partment of xxxxxxxxx sells several hundred bear hunting tags every year. In addition, poachers shoot or snare hundreds of bears annually. Some are killed for subsistence by the indigenous population scattered throughout Kamchatka. The rest are killed for their gall bladders, which are destined for the traditional Chinese medicine market, or because they compete for salmon with caviar

poachers. In the early 1990s, local experts estimated that 2,000 bears were poached in Kamchatka annually, as the price for a third of an ounce of dried gall bladder reached about \$3.50. Though prices have plummeted to less than a dollar, bear carcasses with gall bladders removed through a gash in the belly continue to be found throughout Kamchatka every summer. And today, new roads are opening up areas that previously could be accessed only by helicopter, further threatening Kamchatka’s brown bears.

Recognizing the mounting pressures on Kamchatka’s biodiversity, WCS, in collaboration with local institutions and stakeholders, launched a conservation and management program to provide much needed data on bear–salmon interactions, landscape use by bears, and the impacts of poaching on the bear population. We will also assist local stakeholders in developing mechanisms such as ecotourism to finance bear conservation.

“Everybody in my community knows bears are being poached,” Roman says. “Only when you see these numbers, do you begin to wonder how much longer the bears will survive on the peninsula.”

WCS field scientist Gleb Raygorodetsky grew up in a village on Kamchatka.



Thick snow blankets the Kamchatka Peninsula in early spring, when brown bears (above) emerge from their dens. (Left), the author stands in a deserted, we hope—bear den.