

## Findings Abstract

# Stakeholders' Perceptions of Bear Viewing Tours at an Alpine Ski Area in the Summer

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In North America, there are several popular locations for viewing bears in their natural habitat (e.g., McNeil and Brooks Rivers, Alaska; Knight Inlet, British Columbia; Churchill, Manitoba). As bear viewing has increased in popularity, efforts to understand the experiences and perceptions of bear viewers have received more attention (e.g., Clayton & Mendelsohn, 1993; Lemelin, McCarville, & Smale, 2002; Matt & Aumiller, 2002; Whittaker, 1997). There is little empirical research, however, on: (1) other stakeholders' (e.g., environmental interest groups, tour companies, government agencies) opinions of bear viewing, and (2) visitors' and other stakeholders' perceptions of bear viewing at alpine ski areas in the summer. This study addresses these knowledge gaps.

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This study was conducted at the Whistler Mountain ski area, located 120 km (75 miles) north of Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada. Like many major ski areas in North America, chairlifts on Whistler Mountain operate in the summer for hiking, mountain biking, and wildlife viewing. Guided activities including helicopter tours, snowmobile tours on the glacier, mountain bike tours, and vehicle-based black bear (*Ursus americanus*) viewing tours are also offered. Bear viewing participants accompany a guide who uses a four-wheel drive truck (maximum of 6 people per vehicle) on the mountain's access roads to get close to the bears that forage on vegetation on the ski runs. Over 50 different black bears are usually observed on the mountain throughout the summer. The cost for a bear viewing tour is \$169 (CDN) per person.

On-site visitor surveys ( $n=548$ , response rate=84%) were conducted during the summer (July to September) of 2000 at Whistler Mountain (Needham, 2002). Over 183,700 people visited this ski area during this time. Surveys were also completed by 21 presidents/managers of 12 organizations with recreational (e.g., Whistler Off-Road Cycling Association), environmental (e.g., Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment), governmental (e.g., Municipality of Whistler), and economic (e.g., Intrawest Corporation at Whistler/Blackcomb) interests in summer use at Whistler Mountain.

Respondents were asked if they felt that the presence of the guided tours detracted from, had no effect on, or enhanced the overall summer experience at this ski area. Overall, less than 11% of the visitors rated the bear viewing tours as detracting. Compared to the other tours, the presence of the bear viewing tours was rated by the most visitors (42%) as enhancing the summer experience. For example, over 51% and 44% of the visitors felt that the snowmobile and helicopter tours were detracting, respectively; less than 17% felt that these tours enhanced the overall summer experience. Over 32% of the visitors felt that the mountain bike tours were detracting (23% enhance).

A K-Means cluster analysis of 22 motivations for visiting Whistler Mountain in the summer revealed three distinct visitor groups—those who visited because of the: (1) tours and amenities offered ( $n=170$ ), (2) alpine scenery ( $n=194$ ), and (3) self-guided recreation activities ( $n=147$ ). The presence of the bear viewing tours detracted very few visitors in each cluster (cluster 1 “tour/amenity focused” =7%, cluster 2 “scenery focused”=11%, cluster 3 “recreation focused”=17%). Between 30% (cluster 3) and 47% (cluster 1) of the visitors felt that the presence of these tours enhanced the overall experience. The difference among clusters regarding the bear viewing tours was significant ( $\chi^2=13.48$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.009$ ), but minimal ( $V=.12$ ) (Vaske, Gliner, & Morgan, 2002). Conversely, visitors in cluster 2 were much more likely to rate the helicopter (57%) and snowmobile (71%) tours as detracting, whereas less than 30% of the visitors in cluster 1 felt that these tours were detracting (helicopter tours:  $\chi^2=28.49$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $V=.17$ ; snowmobile tours:  $\chi^2=69.45$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $V=.26$ ). Cluster 3 visitors were the least likely to rate the mountain bike tours as detracting (23%) and were

the most likely to say that these tours enhanced the overall summer experience (36%) ( $\chi^2=37.55$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $V=.20$ ).

There were very few differences among the organizations regarding the bear viewing tours and only 10% of the representatives felt that these tours were detracting. Compared to the visitors and other stakeholders, however, the companies were more likely to feel that the other tours enhanced the summer experience. Given that these companies included the ski area owners (Intrawest) and operators that run tours on the mountain (e.g., Blackcomb Helicopters), these findings are as predicted. Conversely, although all of the environmental interest groups believed that the bear viewing tours enhanced the summer experience, they rated the helicopter, mountain bike, and snowmobile tours as detracting.

Across all visitors, 81% supported more visitor education about bears at this ski area; only 3% were opposed (remaining 16% were neutral). Visitors in cluster 1 supported this strategy slightly more (85%) than those in clusters 2 (80%) and 3 (77%) ( $\chi^2=9.91$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.042$ ,  $V=.10$ ). All 21 members of the other stakeholder groups supported this strategy.

These findings suggest that compared to the other guided tours on Whistler Mountain in the summer, the bear viewing tours were considered by visitors and other stakeholder groups to enhance the summer experience the most. Interestingly, the presence of the vehicle-based bear viewing tours enhanced the overall experience the most, whereas the other motorized tours (e.g., helicopter and snowmobile tours) were considered to be the most detracting. There was also widespread support for providing more visitor education about bears at this ski area. The bear viewing tours offer a means of enhancing education on the mountain. Research is required, however, to examine issues such as the acceptability of potential social and resource impacts associated with the: (1) number and duration of bear viewing tours in an area, and (2) proximity of tour vehicles to the bears.

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