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Main Image:

[Chilkoot river bear \(one-time use only\)](#) ^[1]

Main Image Caption:

An angler holds a cell phone up to the bear known as Speedy, a frequent visitor to a popular bear-viewing spot along the Chilkoot River, in August 2010.

HAINES -- A popular bear-viewing and sportfishing site near this Southeast Alaska community has more problems than [the recent antics of a man in a bear costume](#) ^[2].

Crowding, garbage and careless behavior became so prevalent at Chilkoot River this month that some visitors said they'll never come back. Residents last week called for measures ranging from restoration of a state-funded bear monitor position to closure of the entire corridor until management improves.

For about 15 years, brown bear sows and cubs have congregated to feed along the mile-long river 10 miles from Haines, where the Department of Fish and Game dams up tens of thousands of sockeye and pink salmon.

In late summer, it's one of the most reliable spots on the Alaska road system to see and photograph wild grizzlies, drawing visitors -- including busloads of cruise ship passengers. It's also a popular weekend sportfishing spot for scores of anglers from nearby Whitehorse, Yukon Territory.

Gottfried Esch, a wildlife photographer from Cologne, Germany, who has come here seven years to see bears said the area over the holiday weekend was "worse than a zoo." He cited traffic jams, more than 100 anglers and disregard of bear-viewing protocols.

"Everybody stops in the no-stopping zone. There's no education at all of the fishermen. They're leaving their beer bottles and Red Bull cans around. If the cubs get a taste of Red Bull, and investigate at the campground and get a taste of it again, that's the end of that bear. People are dropping their tins all over," Esch said.

One bear, known as BMJ, became tangled in fishing line at one point.

"All this shows there should be more education," Esch said. "Somebody should take care of this place, or people will start to say, 'Haines is not what it was anymore.'"

Dusan Cizman of Bromberg, Ontario, has been coming to Haines for 12 years. This is his last visit, he said.

"The locals don't respect what they have and the tourists are out of control," Cizman said. He reported seeing bear cubs rooting through tackle boxes, dogs off leashes within 150 feet of bears, cruise ship passengers within 10 feet of bears, and the sow known as Speedy hemmed in by onlookers.

Speedy also twice "chased people off" a bridge across the river that leads to a residential neighborhood, he said.

Cizman said when he tried explaining bear etiquette to others last weekend, he was laughed at.

"One guy said he'd take my cameras and smash them," Cizman said.

Cizman said a bear monitor position discontinued by the state in 2013 would make a "significant difference" but that state troopers also need to ticket motorists who are parking on the bridge and on the narrow road along the river.

"It's out of control right now," he said. "You can't even drive. There are two lanes where cars are parked for hundreds of feet."

Cizman said he grew up around bears in northern Ontario and has photographed them around the world. "This is the worst place for bears that I've seen."

Haines businesses that make money on the bears should be leading the push for tighter regulation, Cizman said. He said he spent \$1,300 here, but he's fed up. "I'd like to emphasize how important these bears are for business. People with businesses should be protecting bears, because this is how they make their money."

He estimated each bear at Chilkoot is worth \$250,000 to the local economy.

Etta Meeks, a 12-year visitor from Florida, said she and her husband no longer want to go out to Chilkoot. Meeks said she has seen a "steady stream of vehicles" that stop or park anywhere, including one motorist asleep behind the wheel in the middle of the road.

"Once somebody notices Speedy and her cubs, all the cars and people begin racing toward them. It is pathetic," Meeks said.

Cruise ship shore excursion tour operator Dan Egolf this week launched an online lobbying effort to get the state Division of Parks and Recreation to restore the monitor position the agency discontinued in 2013.

Speedy and her two cubs have gotten into anglers' fish recently, he said.

"None of this would have happened with a bear monitor," Egolf said. "You wouldn't have a guy in a bear suit. You wouldn't have bears getting fish from fishermen."

Egolf said a monitor enables a "culture" of responsible behavior to be created. "You tell people, 'Don't leave your fish or picnic baskets out, you'll be cited.' That worked."

Egolf said that in the event of big crowds, two monitors on bicycles might be able to keep the peace. But those who are hired as monitors must have the temperament for working with people, he said.

"We've had bear monitors who haven't had the right personality," he said. "That doesn't work at all."

Egolf said new park ranger Travis Russell is doing a good job, but that the parks division needs more support along the river, which is located along a state-maintained road just outside Chilkoot Lake state park.

"I don't want to put Travis on the hot seat, because he's trying to do his job out there," Egolf said.

Haines Chamber of Commerce president Kyle Gray this week described the situation at Chilkoot as "highly-charged and competitive -- not just among commercial user groups, but between any engagement of people, vehicles, bears, fish, and government agencies."

He said the business group has participated over the years in attempts to manage or subdue problems at Chilkoot, "but that until we agree a bear monitor is needed, the current conditions will persist."

One bear monitor, though, may not be enough.

Shannon Donahue, a Haines-based bear researcher who served two years as bear monitor and serves as director of the nonprofit Great Bear Foundation, said last week that "the reality is they probably need a whole suite of people working (along the river). These are probably the most accessible brown bears in the world."

State parks needs to have rules and to enforce them seven days a week, Donahue said, and bear monitors should have a high level of education and experience, she said. "It can't be a technician."

The state determines the quality of the visitor experience there, she said.

"This is not a place that's managed for bear-viewing. It comes down to whether the state wants to do anything serious about management there," Donahue said. In contrast with the photographer who complained recently about lack of management, others are glad to be able to get pictures without rules on their conduct, she said.

"We're drawing the dregs, honestly. People see that the state has no expectations for how people are behaving out there. A lot of tourists want to do the right thing, but they have no idea," Donahue said.

The Chilkoot bears became an issue in the late 1990s, when brown bear sows and cubs started using the river to feed during daylight hours. A dozen or more bears have used the river to feed on any given night, researchers have said.

The problems at Chilkoot have been long understood. In a front-page story in the Aug. 24, 2000, Chilkat Valley News researcher Anthony Crupi said he counted as many as 110 cars and trucks along the mile-long river on a single night and witnessed "frequent" incidents of people coming within 15 feet of bears.

At least \$100,000 of public and private money was spent on a 2003 strategic planning project and signage project aimed at alleviating run-ins between people and bears. Today, 10 tours are permitted to take visitors along the river and the site is listed in state of Alaska literature and publications like Alaska Magazine as a place to watch bears.

Shore excursion tour operator Egolf said some progress has been made, including erecting signage, ending overnight camping along the road, and ending trespassing on Native lands along the river opposite the road. He's a member of the Alaska Chilkoot Bear Foundation, a private group aimed at funding bear awareness efforts.

The foundation hosted a "Celebration of Bears" festival over the weekend in Haines. It pushed the Haines Borough to adopt an ordinance requiring residents to stow garbage away from bears and also has established a lending program for residents to get electric fences and other devices to keep bears away from private property.

Egolf is skeptical of an \$800,000 effort the state is making to build bear-viewing platforms along the river and other landscaping changes aimed at minimizing run-ins between people and bears. He referred to the platforms -- set to be built next year -- as "three blobs of concrete" that will degrade the visitor experience there. Others have said that without a monitor or other personnel policing behavior along the river, the platforms are unlikely to make much of a difference for protecting bears.

Researcher Donahue said the platforms send a mixed message, suggesting that the Chilkoot is a bear-viewing area like McNeil River or Wrangell's Anan Creek, but it's not managed that way, she said.

Parks officials have cited funding shortfalls as well as past authority issues with the bear monitor job for no longer funding the position. Regional parks superintendent Mike Eberhardt said earlier this month that an Alaska Conservation Corps worker coming on the job will cover some monitor duties, along with ranger Russell.

The Division of Parks and Recreation cut services at parks in Valdez and Sitka this year, and Wood-Tikchik State Park, Alaska's largest, is operating with half staffing.

Note: This story has been edited to reflect that services at several state parks have been cut or reduced, but the parks have not been closed, as originally stated.

Note: This article has been edited to remove a reference to a Canadian "Dominion Day" holiday, which was renamed Canada Day in 1982 and is in July, not August.

This [article](#) ^[3] originally appeared at Chilkat Valley News, an independent newspaper based in Haines, and is republished here with permission. Read more or subscribe at the [Chilkat Valley News website](#) ^[4].

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[1] <http://www.adn.com/image/chilkoot-river-bear-one-time-use-only>

[2] <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFJAaahUKewixjuGlrDHAhWEllgKHUIYCDg&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.adn.com/image/chilkoot-river-bear-one-time-use-only>

[3] <http://www.chilkatvalleynews.com/story/2015/08/20/news/chilkoot-bear-scene-worse-than-a-zoo/8155.html>

[4] <http://www.chilkatvalleynews.com/>