

The brown bear: 'A symbol of wellness in the landscape'



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WILTON — LaVern Beier knows a lot about drugs, but he's not a pharmacist. He has spent the last four decades of his life studying and nurturing the brown bear population in the temperate rainforest of southeast Alaska.

"I've learned a lot about drugs," Beier said. "I've immobilized a lot of bears with PCP." Beier, a wildlife technician with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, returned to his native community Thursday to share his passion for brown bear ecology on the first day of Wilton Wood Turtle Days. His Power Point presentation in the Wilton Community Center drew nearly 200 people.

Advances in tranquilizing and tracking technology have transformed how ecologists monitor bears along the southeast Alaska coast.

"We can figure out how fast a bear walked," Beier said. "We can figure out how long he stood under a tree."

The technology was vastly different when Beier left Wisconsin and took his first trip to Alaska to visit his sister and her husband in 1970. Beier was just 17 years old and was convinced he was going to be drafted into the military and sent to Vietnam.

"I wanted to see southeast Alaska before I went over to southeast Asia," he said. Beier's draft number never came up, and he made southeast Alaska his home. He met Bruce Johnstone – a guide, prospector, trapper, fisherman and logger – and learned about capturing nuisance bears. Johnstone reportedly once survived an attack by three bears, and Beier was attacked by a brown bear in 1973 when he and Johnstone were trapping together on the Unuk River.

The experience didn't deter Beier.

"Little did I know it was a diploma in a twisted way," he said.

His interest in brown bears led to his job with Alaska Fish and Game. Much of his work is conducted in the Tongass National Forest, which is home to 6,200 brown bears. Beier attached his first transmitter, a VHF radio collar, to a bear in 1981. Technology became more miniaturized over the years, and in 2001, Beier used a GPS collar for the first time. He said a GPS collar can transmit over 5,000 data points a year. Researchers were handed another tool in the 1990s: DNA. Beier erected “hair snares,” which allowed him to collect DNA from hair samples without having to capture a bear. Beier has tranquilized and tagged over 1,000 bears in his career. He said the choice and administration of tranquilizers is very important regardless of the animal studied. “You can’t use bear drugs on a deer,” he said. “The drugs are always changing. Different cocktails work better than others.”

Accuracy also is important.

“One of these darts is a \$200 dart,” he said.

Once a bear is tranquilized, Beier constantly monitors its vital signs to ensure its health and that it doesn’t awaken in his presence. The routine involves pulling a tooth, drawing blood and taking body and skull measurements.

After the bear is released, its collar transmits the bear’s home range, growth, denning, feeding habits, hunter pressure and mortality. Beier is interested in how often bears head to the river for salmon.

“Like people checking their email, they’re always checking salmon,” he said.

Over the years, he has learned bear populations are very distinct based on where they live. Through DNA samples he has discovered “nine distinct brown bear” populations in southeast Alaska.

“We look at those different populations as countries,” Beier said. “They’ve all adapted to their surroundings. They have different diets. They have different housing.”

He said the brown bear population in southeast Alaska is threatened by habitat loss from logging and, more recently, mining.

Beier is passionate about preserving healthy brown bear populations.

“Why should we care about the bears?” he said. “Why should we care about the monarch butterfly? Why should we care about the wood turtle? It’s a symbol of wellness in the landscape. We try to be objective spokesmen for wildlife because they can’t be.”

http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/the-brown-bear-a-symbol-of-wellness-in-the-landscape/article_38496eff-eb61-512d-b70a-891ecd356101.html