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## **Don't feed the bears, even if they do it on TV**

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Duane Shroufe was channel-surfing a few weeks ago and came upon a television show that may bring smiles to viewers and advertising revenue to the network producing it.

"I found this show where kids go on these adventures," Shroufe recalled. "One was riding on a crocodile."

Shroufe, president of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and director of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, saw the show not as entertainment but as ill-fated advice about "how people should deal with wildlife.

"That's just the wrong message to send," he said by telephone from his office in Phoenix. "We're faced, on a day-to-day basis, issues where those situations have gone bad."

The sort of television programming Shroufe and other wildlife managers dread is easy to find.

On reputable networks like the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet, there's Emmy Award-winning Jeff Corwin taking his viewers on a vicarious after-dark quest for close-up viewing of a grizzly bear. There's the late "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin, holding up a timber rattlesnake by the tail and saying, "He's beautiful, absolutely beautiful. I'm in no danger at all."

You can find it on the dignified British Broadcasting Corporation, where on a special produced by renowned naturalist Sir David Attenborough, an on-camera narrator gives hints about how to approach the grizzlies in the background: "Be relaxed. Talk quietly. Try to avoid eye contact." As a grizzly passes nearby, the host says, "It's OK ... that's a good bear."

Even the MTV network has jumped in on the up-close wildlife market with "Wildboyz," created by the same nimble minds that brought us "Jackass." On one segment, the show's



DREW WILSON/Virginian-Pilot

If "a fed bear is a dead bear," as many wildlife managers insist, this man feeding a black bear alongside a North Carolina highway is giving the bear one fewer reason to fear humans.

stars splash in the water within 10 feet of a grizzly that's clearly not happy with their proximity.

Turn to one of the movie channels and you might find "Grizzly Man," director Werner Herzog's documentary on ill-fated grizzly activist Timothy Treadwell, killed by the very grizzlies he so admired. Surf back to Animal Planet and you might see naturalist and "Grizzly Heart" author Charlie Russell, allowing a grizzly to lick his fingers. Or you might catch bear expert Lynn Rogers hand-feeding the black bears that frequent his Wildlife Research Institute grounds in heavily-forested northeastern Minnesota.

"Everything we try to tell people not to do, they see somebody doing on television," said Harlan Kredit, a seasonal interpretive ranger at Yellowstone National Park. "It makes our job a lot harder."

And it's likely to get harder still. The increasing amount of animal-related programming is indicative of the genre's burgeoning popularity.

"It sells. Why else would you do it?" muses Tom Smith, a longtime research ecologist and bear specialist with the U.S. Geological Survey's Alaska Science Center. "We have an audience eager to pay for this stuff. They get what they want, but that doesn't make it right."

For 30 years, Chuck Bartlebaugh has been waging an almost quixotic campaign to convince the world that much of the prevalent media message in wildlife television is inappropriate and even dangerous.

The founder and director of the Montana-based Center for Wildlife Information, Bartlebaugh spends much of his time researching human-animal encounters -- ones that usually wind up being described in media reports as "attacks." In the vast majority of cases, he has found that the encounter was instigated, knowingly or unknowingly, by the human.

"Wild wildlife are not dangerous. It's when we mess with them or feed them or do something inappropriate," said Bartlebaugh, who, in the late 1970s created the national "Be Bear Aware" education campaign with retired Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf now serving as the national spokesman.

Lynn Rogers, the subject of "The Man Who Walks with Bears," a documentary that has aired nationally more than 70 times since 2001, has a profoundly different take on the issue.

He believes media stories like this one -- pointing out the dangers of getting close to wild animals, notably bears -- demonize the animals. He sees Bartlebaugh's "Be Bear Aware" message creating an atmosphere of fear that leads to bears being unnecessarily destroyed by wildlife agents.

"They take the rare attack, 57 killings (by black bears, 90-plus by grizzlies) in 100 years, and want to manage bears based on what one bear out of a million does," Rogers said. "I say, why not just tell the truth about bears: There is the rare predatory attack, they're unpredictable, no way you can guard against those. Your basic everyday bear wants no part of you."

But feeding bears or encouraging people to get too close to them will too often result in tragedy, said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Doug Zimmer, who serves as information chairman for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee.

"Here you have a professional bear biologist who has spent many, many years studying those bears up close, and he has a real good idea how to read that animal," Zimmer said of bear advocates like Rogers and Russell. "Other people don't have a clue."

"He has an intimate knowledge of their body language, their behaviors, of things you might be able to do. He has the ability to make a judgment and take a calculated risk. Let me throw in there that Tim Treadwell thought he had that ability. Somebody seeing that program can think, Oh, that guy can do that, I want to do that. And they don't do the homework, spending the years. They go out there with hot dogs and try to make friends with an animal that makes a living out of eating things."

Zimmer calls such messages "irresponsible" and says it's equally irresponsible for people to pick up on those messages. "What will happen is you will have human tragedies and animal tragedies."

And, very possibly, legal ramifications.

In a potentially precedent-setting case in Arizona's Coronado National Forest, the Forest Service settled out of court for \$2.5 million (and the Boy Scouts and 4-H organizations settled for undisclosed amounts) several years after a 1996 incident in which a teenage girl was severely mauled by a black bear.

The girls' attorneys had argued that the Forest Service was at fault because of improper food and trash management and that the youth service organizations had failed to prepare visitors for possible bear confrontations.

Bartlebaugh sees the case as one step up a legal staircase that could ultimately result in media organizations being held legally liable. "After (the Arizona case)," he said, "they're the next link in the chain."

Between May 2005 and May 2006, Bartlebaugh pointed out, eight people were killed by bears in North America. "The norm is less than one," he said, noting that as more people move into bear habitat, armed with the TV-bolstered belief that they can befriend bears and other wildlife, the norm is almost sure to grow.

"Everybody's in a race to get their up-close videos, whether they're professionals or supposed professionals or not," he said. "Now we have the new problem: YouTube. People getting videos of them getting close to bears. It's already started."

The Wildlife Society, a nonprofit conservation organization based in suburban Washington, D.C., hasn't taken an official stand on the trend toward hands-on wildlife experiences in television programming. But executive director Michael Hutchins admitted feeling "very uncomfortable" about television personalities demonstrating how to get closer to wildlife.

"They're very often compassionate messages, but we're not giving them the whole picture," Hutchins said.

"Certainly Treadwell's story, if he taught us anything, it's don't get too close to bears because they are large, dangerous carnivores. I think it was very tragic, what happened to Treadwell, but it was very predictable.

"That's what people have to understand."

As part of his perpetual bear-safety education campaign, Bartlebaugh showed a Montana high school class some up-close-and-personal wildlife videos. One showed Charlie Russell offering his hand for a curious grizzly to lick.

Bartlebaugh asked the students to break into small groups, with each to put together a primer on how to do safely what Russell was doing.

The first group came back with these words of wisdom:

If you're stupid enough to let a grizzly lick your fingers, do it with the hand you don't write with.

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