

# B.C.'s expanded grizzly hunt underway as scientists duel over bear numbers

BY GLENDA LUYMES, THE PROVINCE    APRIL 12, 2014



A grizzly bear fishes along a river in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park near Bella Coola, B.C. Friday, Sept 10, 2010. B.C.'s annual hunt is underway with an increase in the numbers of tags for hunters. Scientists on either side of the trophy hunt divide disagree sharply about the size of B.C.'s grizzly bear population.

**Photograph by:** Jonathan Hayward, THE CANADIAN PRESS

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B.C.'s controversial grizzly bear hunt has begun, despite concerns from some in the scientific community who say the government's population estimates could be flawed.

About 1,800 grizzly hunting tags are expected to be issued in B.C. this year — up from 1,700 tags last year, and the highest number in decades — although it is expected the actual number of bears killed will be closer to the annual average of about 300.

The province has also opened several areas previously closed to grizzly hunting for conservation reasons, including parts of the Kootenays.

But a recent study by the Raincoast Conservation Society that looked at B.C. grizzly hunting over a 10-year period from 2001 to 2011 found that “over-kill” (or an unsustainable mortality rate) occurred in about half of all hunting regions at some point during that time.

Raincoast biologist and Simon Fraser University PhD candidate Kyle Artelle, who was involved in the study, also questioned the B.C. government's grizzly population estimates.

"The way the hunt is done it's like trying to manage a bank account without knowing the balance," he said.

In a letter published in March in *Science*, Artelle and his colleagues said provincial wildlife managers should be held to the same standard as research scientists, whose work must have independent oversight.

But the government pointed to its own peer-reviewed work, saying in a press release on the 2014 hunt that it is using the "best-available science to ensure harvest levels are sustainable."

"I think we have the best idea (of the population) of any of the jurisdictions that hunt bears right now," provincial grizzly biologist Garth Mowat said in an earlier interview.

"We have spent a lot of resources improving our understanding of the number of bears in British Columbia and I'm quite comfortable that it's good enough to allow us to conservatively manage the hunt."

For those who live in grizzly country, the hunt is part of the way of life.

"If you live in Vancouver, it's easy to be against hunting," said Horsefly resident David Farkas.

The man chased a grizzly out of his backyard last fall.

"We live with these animals," he said. "People here love fishing and hunting."

On the Kootenay Hunters & Fishers Facebook page several people have written about the 2014 grizzly hunt, some posting pictures of themselves with bears they've killed in the past. A petition connected to the page called Support the BC Grizzly Hunt has received almost 12,000 signatures since April 2012.

"Hunters and outdoorsmen have long been the true conservationists in Canada, North America, and the world," the petition claims.

But bear guide Neil Shearar said he doesn't believe that's true.

"Conservation for the sake of making sure there's enough animals to hunt isn't really conservation," he said, explaining that conservation that's simply based on increasing a population, rather than restoring a balanced eco-system, can lead to problems for other species.

Shearar, who has been guiding on the B.C. coast for about 15 years, compared killing grizzlies to killing sharks for their fins.

"It's trophy hunting," he said. "People aren't eating them. They're shooting them for their head and paws."

An online petition called Stop the Trophy Hunt has collected about 64,500 signatures since March 2010.

— *With files from The Canadian Press*

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## **BEAR FACTS**

- About 35 per cent of British Columbia is closed to grizzly hunting.
- Historically, hunters have killed around 300 grizzly bears a year out of a population estimated by the B.C. government of 15,000, or a two per cent harvest rate.
- The grizzly bear hunt is the most intensively managed hunt of any species in the province.
- About 1,800 tags are expected to be issued to hunters this year, up from 1,700 last year.
- The spring grizzly hunt runs from April 1 to the end of May. The fall hunt begins Oct. 1 and continues into mid-November.

— **Source: B.C. Ministry of Forests**

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