



**MOUNTAINFILM**  
FOR STUDENTS

# BEAR WHISPERER

**DIRECTOR** Robert Gourley  
**DURATION** 5 min

Originally hired by the police department to exterminate bears that had overpopulated Mammoth Lakes, California, Steve Searles instead decided to teach the bears to co-exist with the town's residents. "Nobody has ever been killed by a black bear," he explains. "I know each bear individually in Mammoth from the time they're born until the time they die."



# Standards

## COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR READING

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 / Key Ideas and Details**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8 / Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9 / Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10 / Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

## COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR SPEAKING & LISTENING

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1 / Comprehension and Collaboration**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 / Comprehension and Collaboration**

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3 / Comprehension and Collaboration**

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4 / Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

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## Key Vocabulary

black bear, grizzly bear, conservation, rural, urban, suburban

# Pre-Screening Activities

## Pre-Screening Activity 1

This website, maintained by the National Wildlife Federation, titled [“Black Bears”](#) gives information on the American black bear, including a basic description, range, diet, life history and conservation.

Prior to watching the film *Bear Whisperer*, students should familiarize themselves with each section (either by reading as a group, reading sections individually and reporting to the class, or independently reading). When students are done reading all sections, re-read the following quote from the conservation section:

**“The key to successful coexistence between humans and bears is to recognize that it is no longer possible for either species to occupy all habitats, but that where co-occupancy is possible and desirable, humans must be responsible for the welfare of the bear population. Wild areas with little human footprint will remain the most important habitat for bears, but peaceful coexistence can occur in the urban-wildland interface as long as humans take the necessary steps to assure that the relationship remains a positive one.”**

After re-reading this quote, have students work with a partner to brainstorm what successful coexistence between humans and bears could potentially look like.

Dependent upon where you live, and your students’ background knowledge, you could change this to: **What does successful coexistence look like with deer/moose/elk/birds?**

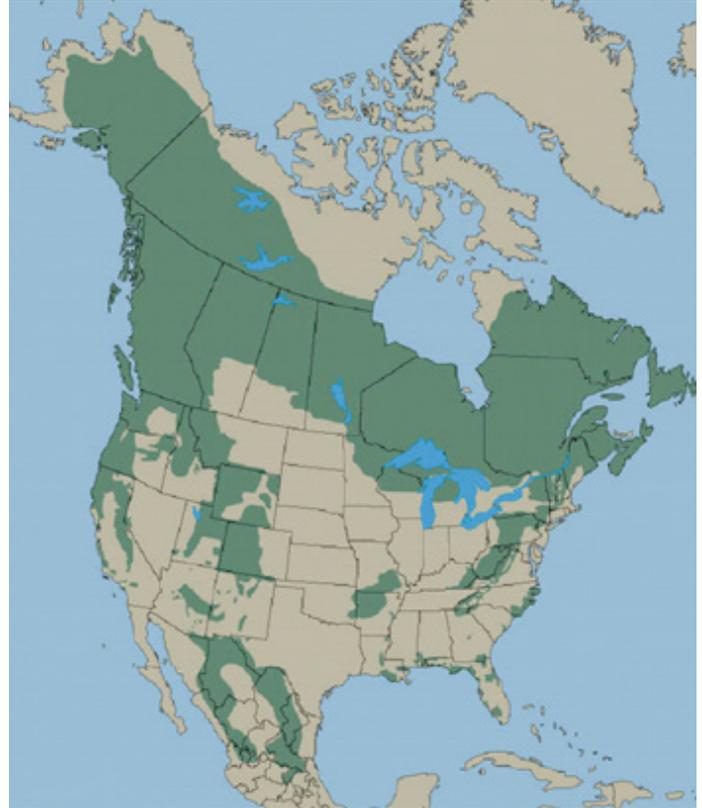
The goal is to get students to begin thinking about what a successful coexistence of space between humans and animals looks like. You could take the discussion further by asking: **Is such a thing possible with humans taking over land and the loss of animal habitat?**

# Pre-Screening Activity 2

Once students have finished their discussion from Pre-Screening Activity 1, direct them to this website, [Black Bear Range](#) from the North American Bear Center, which displays two maps side-by-side (see below) to show the historical range compared to the 1995 range of black bears in the United States.



Historical Range



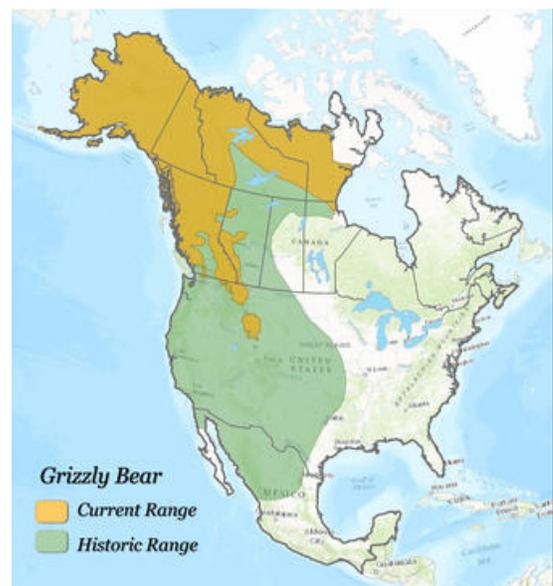
1995 Range

After reviewing the maps, ask the students: **What factors influenced the decline in black bear range?**

This website, [Return of the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear](#) from U.S. Geological Survey, shows a map of the current range vs. the historic range of the grizzly bear.

After reviewing this map, display it alongside the first map, to show the difference in range for black bears vs. grizzly bears and ask students:

- **Why do they think there is such a difference between the current range for black bears vs. the current range for grizzly bears?**
- **Why do they think there has been such a decline in the population of the grizzly bears, as opposed to black bears?**
- **Drawing upon the previous brainstorming of creating a successful coexistence, do students think that there is a possibility of successful coexistence for humans and bears?**



# Discussion Guide

## GENERAL/OPEN PROMPTS

1. Do you think that if someone else besides Steve Searles had been hired by the police department of Mammoth Lakes, they would have been as successful in teaching the bears to co-exist with the town's residents?

## EXPLORING SELF

1. In the film, Steve Searles states that bears are very gentle and thoughtful, and that if you spend enough time with a bear, it is hard to not build a connection. Do you think Searles is anthropomorphizing bears, or did what he say ring true? How does building a personal connection with something make you want to protect it?
2. In the film, Steve Searles states that people have an innate fear of bears and that is due to a lot of "crazy misconceptions people have about black bears." Why do you think those misconceptions exist, and do you think these misconceptions have led to the decline of the black bear population over time? What other animals do you believe there are misconceptions around? What are some ways to reverse those misconceptions?

## EXPLORING THE WORLD

1. What does animal conservation look like all over the world? How do you think America ranks in its conservation of animals as opposed to other countries?

## EXPLORING FILMMAKING

1. Why do you think Robert Gourley, a director, cinematographer, and editor based in Los Angeles, chose to make this film? Do you think the film is about conservation or Steve Searles or both?

## EXPLORING SOCIAL ISSUES

1. What does successful coexistence with bears look like? What does successful coexistence with all wildlife and nature look like? Is it possible?
2. In the film, Steve Searles states that he would kill 10 bears in a row to keep a person alive. However, he also discusses that California's population of 30 million people are some of the dumbest people in the world. People often make careless mistakes in visiting wild places, and bears are attracted to human food. Who has the right to live, the human or wildlife?

## SENSE OF WONDER

1. Do you think Steve Searles has a natural gift for working with animals? Or do you think this is something he learned over time?
2. What would California be like if there were still grizzly bears?

# Activities

## Activity 1

In June of 2020, the current administration reversed hunting methods for hunters in the Alaskan wilderness that were banned by the previous administration after they were deemed barbaric.

The article, titled [“Trump Administration Revives Banned Hunting Techniques in Alaska”](#) by Lisa Friedman for the *New York Times*, details how this reversal has now legalized the baiting of grizzly bears with doughnuts soaked in bacon grease, using spotlights to blind and shoot hibernating mothers and cubs, killing wolves and pups, and the use of dogs to hunt bears. In the article, two different viewpoints are shown. Eddie Grasser, director of wildlife conservation for Alaska Department of Fish and Game, believes the tactics would be used sparingly and mostly by people who are living off of the land, whereas Laura Smythe, staff attorney with the Humane Society of the United States, believes this reversal would allow extreme cruel killing methods on over 20 million acres in Alaska.

This article, from the National Park Service, titled [“National Park Services Aligns Regulations with State Law for Hunting and Trapping in Alaska National Preserves”](#) by Peter Christian (May 20, 2020) covers the same topic, but is in support of the reversal. This article highlights how the rules implemented in 2015 were too restrictive for rural Alaskans and was not in support of their way of life.

This study (February 2020) by Robert Bonnie, Emily Perchar Diamond, and Elizabeth Rowe published by the Nicholas Institute of the Environment at Duke University, is titled [“Understanding Rural Attitudes Toward the Environment and Conservation in America.”](#) The findings in this publication come from two studies, including interviews with focus groups with rural voters and stakeholder leaders across the U.S., as well as telephone survey data of urban and rural voters across the country. Data was then extended to focus specifically on climate change attitudes, with a focus being on data collection from rural voters in the upper Midwest. Although this publication’s main findings are focused on attitudes towards climate change, it’s findings are relevant to the discussion around the reversal of hunting techniques. To give students background information, it would be important to read the **Executive Summary** (pg. 3) and **What We Found** sections (pg. 4-6).

After reviewing the articles and the study, you will ask students to debate around the essential question:

**Whose voice is more important in environmental conservation – rural or suburban/urban Americans’?**

Students should use information from all three sources to support their belief that either the rural or suburban/urban Americans’ voice is most important in the conversation on environmental conservation. Students may also fall somewhere in the middle, and argue that it is important for all demographics to be represented in these decisions. To further challenge viewpoints, you could talk about the [racial demographics of rural Americans](#).

This debate can be either as formal or informal as you deem appropriate for your student group, and time you would like to commit to this activity. It can also be a discussion about whether or not the reversal of hunting laws in Alaska is humane or inhumane. It would be interesting to see students’ ideas about how to generate support from rural, suburban and urban America to be in support of/or against the new federal regulations for hunting in Alaska. On pg. 6-7 of the study, there is a list of recommendations. Using the recommendations listed, ask: **How would students create conservation policy that respects rural attitudes and needs?**

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## RECOMMENDED EXTENTIONS

Steve Searles, the bear-whisperer featured in the film *Bear Whisperer*, has recently had to quit his position in Mammoth Lakes, California due to budget-cuts to municipalities nationwide. He was asked to cut his salary in half and work six months, as opposed to year round. This article, [“He Kept a Community’s Bears in Check, but He Won’t Anymore”](#) by Jason Nark profiles his story for the *New York Times* (July 18, 2020).

Colorado’s [Initiative 107: Restoration of Gray Wolves](#) is an initiative that would reintroduce native wolves to Colorado. This article for the Denver Post, [“In western Colorado, wary ranchers eye wolves’ arrival and fear urban voters will introduce more”](#) by Bruce Finley (July 26, 2020), highlights the opposing views on wolf conservation and reintroduction in Colorado by showcasing the rural/urban/suburban divide on the issue.

[“The Eight Bear Species of the World”](#) from Bear With Us

[“Living/Existing with Bears”](#) from Wise About Bears is a practical article about steps to take to successfully co-exist with bears

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