

Grizzly Times
The Grizzly Beat Podcast
Interview with Charlie Russell, Part 2
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GT: Charlie, you have this amazing set of abilities, and one of them is you're an ultra-light pilot, and that allowed you to track these grizzly bears in this remote wilderness as well as the salmon that they ate, and even poachers who were around Kamchatka at a time when poaching was rampant after the Soviet Union fell apart. And the Russian mafia seemed to be everywhere, and there was a high price for bear parts like gall bladder. And the cubs may have been threatened by big bears, but in your book you seemed constantly threatened by bureaucrats on the take, and coming and going on helicopters. How did you navigate all of that?

CR: Oh man, how much time have we got to answer that question. But yeah, I was incredibly lucky. Another thing that our mutual friend Igor suggested when we set this program up was, he said: "Why don't you bring your plane?" This is a plane I built to do another project with the Spirit Bear on the west coast of B.C. And I built it myself. It's called an ultra-light in Canada but it's not anywhere else. It's got too big a motor, so it's not really an ultra-light. It's something I chose very carefully, it's built from a kit, I wanted something that could handle bad weather. Because I knew I was going into bad weather on the west coast.

And Igor suggested that I bring it to a place where not too long before that an airliner or Korean airliner had been shot down right over Kamchatka for entering the very sensitive air space because of the Cold War. And it was a 747 and they shot it down because it flew over their nuclear sub base in Petropavlosk. So here Igor suggesting I bring my own plane to fly in this very sensitive area. I thought he was crazy to suggest it, but we both love to fly, he and I, and so if he said "I think it will work", then I was not going to turn down that possibility.

It wasn't quite that simple but, I ended up there and with my plane and it was incredible tool, because it's kind of expensive to use helicopters for doing everything. There are no roads in Kamchatka and so you have to do everything by air, and so here I had my own transportation, but I didn't have permission from everybody. He realized that because communism, the Soviet Union had just fallen apart, everyone was kind of not knowing what to do and the Russians, and so he saw as a possibility that we could fall through the cracks on the plane issue and it worked. They didn't have the money really to come. When they discovered -- a certain group knew I was bringing it. The wildlife, the protection agency, knew I was bringing it, but the border guard and those people didn't, and when they discovered that I was doing this or had my plane, I was already 250 kilometers and building a cabin.

Igor just said, "Well, they don't really have money to come and do anything about it," and he said, "I hear some talk around that they think that you will kill yourself within three weeks, and they wouldn't have to do anything about it." Because it's impossible, they thought it would be impossible to operate that plane down, you know, it's such wild country and out of touch with everybody. Anyway, it was quite a challenge not to make that one come true for them.

But it also gave me an incredible way to see things. And I saw a lot of things going on like poaching of caviar -- and the salmon were the reason that the south Kamchatka sanctuary was set aside for protection. It was the salmon and the bears. And so I thought that I could see that they didn't have any way really to stop me. If they couldn't stop me from flying down there, they didn't have any real way of stopping the poaching either. They didn't have any money, and so I suggested to them that I could probably find some money to start a ranger program and they went along with it.

Also, it would be normally very tricky to understand whether your money was actually going to. Anyway there were many things that they said they were going to do with this money that I could use my plane and go and check up on. And so I would fly down to the river, the cabin was being built. I could ask them did they get that outboard motor as well? These were amazing opportunities that I had with the plane that normally I wouldn't be able to check up on it. This would give me more power to raise more money because of this, because I could run such a close eye on what the money was being spent on. I could get more money. Anyway, eventually six rangers were hired and it became quite a successful way of stopping this salmon caviar poaching.

GT: That's great. So Charlie, based your many experiences in Kamchatka and Canada and elsewhere, what kind of relationship do you think is possible with grizzly bears and what do you think are biggest obstacles we still face?

C: The biggest obstacle is ourselves. It's people. I came back from this experience knowing that it was not a bear problem. I knew it was a people problem. I had just experienced the most amazing time with these animals, and I've told you a few of the not so amazing times with people, because it was always the people that seemed to me was the problem.

I am asked, "Are you going to go back? Are you going to continue research with bears?" And I say, "No, I am not, because it's not a bear problem, it's a people problem." And the work that I need to do is to try to persuade people that we're on the wrong track. We need to manage these animals in a different way.

We create danger in grizzly bears by how they're managed because we insist that they need to be afraid of us and wild, meaning that they have to be separate from people. They have to live in their own world and we in our world. So our management around that is to be rough with them so that they don't like people. If they don't like people I'm sure that these are the dangerous bears. The dangerous bears are the ones that are really fearful and don't like people. Their whole life experience has never been anything good about people.

So I asked Park officials, so I said, "Why do you people who are so fearful of litigation that you think that bears are going to hurt somebody and then sue you for that, why do you make them dangerous?" This is not a popular question. And they don't know how to really answer that, so they pretend they don't exist. But it's a good question and people are slowly starting to think about it.

And I spent my time thinking about bears and not experiencing what people really do and it's pretty weird out there when you're a Park manager and you've got everybody coming to see your animals and some of them are grizzly bears -- God knows what they might think of doing, and usually you can't even imagine what they think of doing -- and so it's a tricky thing. So I find I know quite a bit about bears, but I don't know a lot about people.

So, how's does that work? So, those are the issues that people have to sort out, that managers have to sort out. I don't have all the answer that way. But I think that the bears are amazingly capable of dealing with stupid people, providing they like us a little bit, so we give them some reason to like us. They're really good at sorting out the stupidity but if we don't give them any reason to like us then there are a few bears that will hurt you, I'm convinced of that. That's what we read about and that's what we experience. And there are those few bears that don't like people -- that deal with people the way I might if I was treated that way. That's the other thing. I identify now so much with the bears I think, "Oh my God, if I have been treated like you've been treated, I would do worse than you do."

GT: Charlie, maybe speaking of one of those bears, you and I were both good friends with Timothy Treadwell, who was killed and eaten by a grizzly bear in 2003 along with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard. And of course this then became the subject of a film by Werner Herzog called the Grizzly Man. And I know this question could take hours to answer -- and you and I have talked about this for hours and days on end -- but, looking back on that tragedy, and knowing that both of us could have become bear dinner on many occasions, and perhaps still could, what are your reflections today on Timothy?

CR: I've already hinted a bit about that, because I think there's been three people in my life who have spent an awful lot of time with bears and were considered, maybe some of them, bear whisperers, and they think of themselves, or they're kind of proud that they were that, and one of them was Michio Hochino, and all three of these people are dead now. Vitaly Nikolayenko, he probably spent more time with bears than anybody in the world. And yet he died. Then there's Timothy Treadwell, he also died and so when you have three people that you have known, you have to wonder, what did they do that you didn't do? Because I didn't die yet.

A lot of people think I'm just lucky, but I think that the mistakes that people around bears that get to know bears really well make is that they think they are immune to harm from the bears. And especially if you think of yourself as a bear whisperer, or something like that, then it kind of blinds you to the possibility that there are bears out there that don't like people and that might hurt you. And so Timothy fell into that group and so did Michio and Vitaly. And so that's where I differ from these people. I never got thinking that I was immune to harm.

I've seen bears like the one that killed Timothy. I'm sure I have. But I was able to stay away from them and I also was very careful to have bear spray with me, because I think that this bear spray is well developed, well proven that it works. And people that are hiking in bear country, especially in country where bears are taught to not like people, and then you should carry bear spray. These are things that are important to understand, I think, to keep you alive. Timothy did not carry bear spray. He didn't use an electric fence around his tent. He didn't know every bear.

Don't assume no matter how much you like these animals, don't assume they won't hurt you. They've got a lot of reasons not to like us and maybe to want to hurt us, so we've got to change that before we can trust every bear.

GT: Right. So Charlie, you know that here in Yellowstone there's a debate about delisting grizzly bears and hunting them, and of course, in Alberta, there's a discussion again on hunting grizzly bears. What do you think that could do to our relationship with grizzly bears?

CR: The situation here is that we have not hunted them for 10 years. And I've watched carefully what this means. And we have a group of ranchers here, a generation of ranchers that is quite different from my generation, or my father's generation or my grandfather's generation. We all killed grizzly bears on the ranches and the Fish and Wildlife kind of turned their back on it. It was sort of an unwritten policy that the bears that are on your place, you can kill them. And because the bears are so dangerous to your cattle and everything. But when it was discovered that there weren't that many grizzlies left in Alberta, this was back in '06, and they put a moratorium on hunting grizzlies -- because there was a hunting season before that.

This changed things because this generation of ranchers is amazingly law abiding here. When they were told they couldn't hunt them or kill them -- not everybody, but the majority of them -- didn't do that. And the consequence of that was that the numbers at least in this area and next to Glacier on the U.S. border, is particularly good habitat -- the bears really took advantage of it.

Another thing I didn't talk about was that I think grizzly bears want to be social with us. They're intelligent animals. They know that we control the productive land that they also need to live well on, and so they basically are always kind of testing that. Whether they can be social with people. And before this happened, their answer to their test of whether they could be social was a volley of rifle shots, and that was their answer so they would go back and hide for a while, but they would test again.

So it didn't take them long to understand that something was different and they really came on to this productive land quite quickly. Of course, they started to raise more cubs, because if you've suddenly got access to wonderful, much better food than you're used to by being forced to live in the alpine valleys high up in the mountains where it's difficult for a female to raise one cub, then suddenly you're down amongst cattle eating some oats -- and even now they're going far enough out to get into the wheat soils and canola, the oil seeds and so they're now, females, showing up with four cubs.

So this quickly becomes another question: How many bears can we really live with? That's one of the wonderful things about my experiment in Kamchatka was that I think that I was living in an area that reached maximum numbers of bears. Really, they themselves wouldn't allow more bears because the higher the numbers, the more predation their own predation on each other happens. And so bears don't propagate unrestrictedly. There is a limit.

But can we live with great numbers of bears, not great numbers, with more bears is the question. And these people here, I have to hand it to them. They're making an effort to learn that. I help

them as much as I can. But if we go back to the hunting culture, which is what we're getting away from, then the talk about bears completely changes.

Now, people are learning to enjoy them, seeing them among their cattle, but they could never do that before, because it was always about the danger, the horrible mess of this animal, which was how people who hunt bears have to think of them, in a way that they're a terrible animal -- otherwise they couldn't feel good about killing this beautiful, incredible animal. So it would be a huge setback for us here to go back because we have to start talking about them in this way again.

And I think your situation where you're talking about delisting them, it's the same problem. It's really a tricky thing and it's about how people think about the animal. And if you think that you can live with them, you can. It's just that simple. If you don't think you can live with them, you can't. You're going to have to kill a lot of bears. So, I really worry about the delisting for that reason. Well, I spent my whole life trying to get people to think about them in a different way, and I'm seeing progress along those lines. And people are now at least here in Alberta, they are thinking about them and enjoying them differently -- but that could all change with a hunting season.

GT: That's so true. So given the ambivalence that you just expressed, are you hopeful for the future of grizzly bears in our Rocky Mountain back yards?

CR: I'm more hopeful about grizzly bears than I am about people. But that's another long complicated answer to why I say that. I think that I learned from my wonderful opportunity to immerse myself into the pure natural situation that I did in Russia for those 10 years. I think I learned that we are so on the wrong track that we're in trouble. And of course the bears are in trouble too to a certain extent, but it's because of us. But generally, I worry about us more than bears right now.

I would hate to see -- part of the problem that we are in is that we think we are so separate from nature that we can just kill animals. We can just do what we want to do -- and we chose an economic model that requires continuous growth. There is nothing like that in nature. Nature just doesn't provide a situation where we can do that forever. So, it has put us in a place that we have to always be looking at profits. And that's what's happening in this delisting thing.

It's all about how can we now finally make some money off these animals with licensing and all this. This is the problem that I'm telling you that it's not just with the bears, it's with everything. We're all after profit. We have to be because we have to have growth every year. We have to have so-called progress and that's what progress and growth looks like. It's regression. We're going to be forced to regress to go backwards a ways, because we've taken the growth too far or we're about to. So, it's a serious situation that's why I say I worry more about us than the bears. It's complicated.

GT: Well thank you very much. Thank you Charlie, we're listening to Charlie Russell and The Grizzly Beat.