

Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center Web Article

“Spokescritter” Web site for AZA (American Zoo & Aquarium Association)

I researched and wrote this Web article about the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center to promote the work of this AZA-accredited institution and to highlight threats to the wild grizzly population outside of Yellowstone National Park.

A Fed Bear Is A Dead Bear

The Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center helps avert tragedy one garbage container at a time.

Located just outside Yellowstone National Park, the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center (GWDC) is home to the largest concentration of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states. GWDC tests bear-resistant containers in an effort to reduce human-bear conflicts that occur when bears become habituated to human food found in garbage cans.

“Testing bear-proof containers is some of the most important work we do here,” said John Heine, director of GWDC. “It gives back to the bears in the wild.”

Home for Wayward Bears

Currently, the GWDC is home to eight grizzly bears that were saved from certain death. Some were orphaned in the wild, while others were going to be destroyed because they had become nuisance bears.

“A number of bears are destroyed every year because they become habituated to human food found in garbage and around residences,” said Heine. “If people would use bear-proof containers, it would prevent bears from becoming habituated and would avoid many human-grizzly encounters.”

Put to the Test

Manufacturers of bear-resistant containers bring their products to GWDC for the ultimate test: 90 minutes with container-savvy bears. These include everything from tear-resistant food bags to full-size dumpsters.

“We do everything we can to make it as enticing as possible,” said Heine. Favorite foods, such as fish, elk meat and peanut butter are placed inside and smeared around doors, latches and handles.

Quality Assurance Experts

Each bear has her or her own unique methods for cracking open containers. One bear prefers to bounce on products while another excels at manipulating handles and latches. “We don’t consider a test done until we’ve seen the bears use all their techniques,” said Heine.

Lessons for Bear Country

The product testing is incorporated into GWDC’s public education efforts. During public presentations, visitors get to see the containers and how they work before the containers are given to the bears. They get to see it again after the bears are through with it. “Our education is geared towards people going to Yellowstone, to help educate them about the bears there,” said Heine.

[photo: spirit.jpg]

Spirit, the first grizzly to come to the GWDC, was removed from northwest Montana after she lost her fear of humans. Nothing could keep her from populated areas, not bear dogs or cracker shells, not even rubber bullets.

[photo: Nakina&Kobuk.jpg]

Two orphaned grizzly cubs, a female named Nakina and a male named Kobuk, came to GWDC in 1998 after a landowner shot their mother and a sibling cub in Alaska.