

B.C. 'pot bears' learning how to feed themselves

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The pot bears are back.

Allen Piche, the Christina Lake, B.C., farmer accused by police of using docile black bears to guard a marijuana grow-op, says the animals are coming out of hibernation and returning to his property in search of a snack. But because Mr. Piche is no longer giving them food, the bears he considers his friends aren't sticking around.

And while their lack of loyalty leaves him with a heavy heart, it may very well save their lives.

RCMP discovered the group of two dozen bears on Mr. Piche's remote property when they raided a suspected grow-op late last summer. Even though the bears turned out to be quite tame and officers felt safe enough to pose with them for pictures, police said they suspected the bears had been trained to guard the grow-op.

It's a "ridiculous" accusation, said Mr. Piche, who has pleaded guilty to one count of feeding dangerous wildlife, but has pleaded not guilty to charges of running a grow-op. "Our friendship [between Mr. Piche and the bears] goes back a long way."

For 12 years, Mr. Piche attracted the bears to his property with a daily offering of dry dog food made from wheat and corn. Mr. Piche would sit among the bears, talk to them and touch them. He gave them names and felt like he got to know them.

But once wildlife officials learned of Mr. Piche's bears, they were horrified. Bears that get used to being fed by humans can become aggressive once the easy source of food disappears and they often have to be destroyed to protect people and property.

At first, Mr. Piche was ordered to stop feeding the bears as authorities mulled their fate. But as news of their plight spread, public pressure to save the bears mounted. Eventually it was decided to let Mr. Piche continue with the feedings until the bears went into hibernation.

The hope was that if Mr. Piche refrained from putting out food once they re-emerged, they would take off into the woods and fend for themselves.

So far this spring, about 20 bears have returned to Mr. Piche's property. "I've gone out and said hello to them and said goodbye to them and touched them," he said. "Except for this mother with the triplets who stayed a little longer because it was raining, none of them stayed longer than 10 minutes."

Mr. Piche said he is following the ministry's orders because he can't afford not to, not because he thinks there is anything wrong with what he was doing.

But not being able to feed his friends has been emotionally tough.

"I didn't think I'd be able to face these bears face to face and say, 'Look, I know I've known you since you were

born but you got to go,' ” he said.

He added that he is confident the bears will stay away once they realize he is not putting out any more food. “My feeling is, absolutely, they don’t have to be killed,” he said.

Government officials are not so sure, however.

“We’re monitoring the situation to ensure that public safety isn’t threatened,” said conservation officer Inspector Aaron Canuel.

He said that by feeding the bears, Mr. Piche put both himself and the public at risk and that it far from certain how the bears will behave over the long term.

“If a bear is destroying property or becoming a threat to somebody, we will address that situation,” he said.

While officials are willing to consider relocating the bears should they become a problem, “that’s not always the best option,” Insp. Canuel said. “Sometimes, to be frank, bears have to be destroyed. When you’ve got a severely habituated bear that’s basically not stopping short of creating damage, we have to do that.”

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