

New B.C. charity founded to protect province's grizzly bears

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Michael Audain, one of British Columbia's leading philanthropists and the chairman of Polygon Homes Ltd., had been waiting for hours in the rain when four grizzly bears emerged from the dripping rainforest and began walking toward him.

The mother and three cubs passed so close he could see beads of water on their rippling fur.

"I found them quite awe-inspiring," said Mr. Audain in an interview. "I felt completely comfortable and the bears seemed to feel completely comfortable with us and I said, 'wow, that's absolutely wonderful.'"

That close encounter in the Great Bear Rainforest in 2014 profoundly affected him and his wife, Yoshiko Karasawa, and led to the announcement Thursday in Vancouver that the Audain family has set up a charity dedicated to the protection of grizzly bears.

It is believed to be the first of its kind in Canada.

While many have blamed the controversial grizzly bear trophy hunt for population declines in B.C., Mr. Audain said the new foundation will gather evidence before reaching any conclusions.

"We do realize there are quite a number of issues beyond hunting. Particularly in terms of ... concern about the loss of food source and habitat and other situations that could threaten the existence of the species in

various parts of the province," he said. "We want to inform ourselves. We don't have all the answers. We are not going to be advocating policy right away. We want to consult with people, with environmental organizations, hunting organizations, First Nations and ask them for ideas about what we should be doing, about what perhaps government should be doing."

As an opening initiative, the Grizzly Bear Foundation will launch a board of inquiry that will tour the province this fall, stopping at six communities, to gather public views on what should be done to help grizzly bears survive in B.C., their last stronghold in North America.

Between Sept. 27 and Oct. 20, meetings will take place in Cranbrook, Prince George, Fort St. John, Vancouver, Prince Rupert and Victoria. A report is expected by the end of January.

Mr. Audain said his concerns about the long-term future of grizzly bears took hold after several close encounters showed him that what some view as a fearsome predator has a gentler, more vulnerable side.

"I never had anything to do with grizzly bears until two years ago when I went up to [Spirit Bear Lodge] in Klemtu," he said. "I had heard of people going to look at bears. I was curious about it and I just became very intrigued by what I saw up there, the encounters we had and then I started to ask questions."

What he learned is that while there are an estimated 15,000 grizzly bears in B.C., accounting for about one-quarter of the North American population, the numbers are dwindling in several areas due to habitat loss and other pressures.

"Many years ago [they] roamed throughout a large part of North America. They have retreated now to mainly the mountains of B.C. and Alaska," Mr. Audain said.

The Audain Foundation is known mostly for its support of the visual arts, to which it has donated more than \$100-million over the years, including founding the Audain Art Museum, which opened to rave reviews in Whistler this spring.

The Grizzly Bear Foundation has been started with a family gift of \$500,000, but the charity will be seeking additional public donations.

"If there's anything comparable to what we want to do it would be the Pacific Salmon Foundation that's devoted to the wild salmon, while we are going to be devoted to the long-term welfare of the bears in British Columbia and Canada," said Mr. Audain.

"We felt that we would focus on the grizzly bear partly because of our experience with the bears, but also we realized there wasn't a single organization devoted to the long-term well-being of grizzly bears," he said. "I think the bears need a friend."

Joining Mr. Audain on the founding board are Dr. Ken Macquisten, a wildlife veterinarian, John McKercher, a retired lawyer, Stuart McLaughlin, an executive in the B.C. tourism industry and chair of the B.C. Pavilion Corp., Bruce McLellan, co-chair of the bear specialist group with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Douglas Neasloss, chief of the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation and Suzanne Veit, a retired B.C. government deputy minister.

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