

The Ecstasy and the Agony¹

Nic Madge discovers spirit bears and troubling ethical questions in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest

Deep in the Great Bear Rainforest, the only sound was the gentle babbling of the stream flowing between tall sitka spruces and towering red cedars festooned with grey-green lichen. We waited expectantly for the elusive spirit bears which come down to feast on the salmon swimming upstream to spawn. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a muffled cry. "Ma'ah is coming." All eyes and camera lenses turned left. There, emerging through the thick undergrowth, was a large, cream spirit bear.



Ma'ah with part of a salmon in her mouth

Ma'ah is a star of the animal kingdom. She is revered by the Gitga'at First Nation, where her name means Grandmother. She has appeared on the cover of *National Geographic*. She features prominently in the IMAX film *The Great Bear Rainforest*, and, we were told, her image was an important factor in halting the construction of the Trans Mountain oil pipeline from Alberta. Grown men become emotional and shed tears in her presence.

Ma'ah shuffled on down the moss-covered rocks in the stream bed. Slowly, deliberately, she walked round a pool where the dorsal fins of male salmon were breaking the surface. She paused and looked down into the clear water, but then carried on walking. She picked up

¹ With apologies to Irving Stone.

and ate some salmon scraps, left by other bears, and then walked along a mossy log, barely fifteen feet away from us. Ma'ah turned her head towards us for a second. We looked at her small eyes, their long lashes and distinctive grey racoon-like rings. We saw her mouth, with its worn teeth. The fur on her back resembled a thick, old cream carpet in need of a shampoo clean. Her legs and stomach were a dirty grey. Her feet were huge, with long, cream claws. Ma'ah though was not interested in us. She crossed the stream and found a near-dead, spawned-out salmon. She picked it up in her jaws and disappeared to eat it in the forest.



A black bear emerges with a salmon in its mouth after diving under water

Over four days, we observed three different spirit bears and perhaps a dozen black bears. They used different fishing techniques. One young male black bear belly-flopped and splashed around the pool, lunging here and there, but rarely caught a fish. A female black bear, mother to three cubs, stood still and caught a dozen salmon in a morning, pressing them down with her claws onto underwater rocks before sharing them with her offspring. Two days later, when the water was far higher and the stream had become a raging torrent, bears stood on either side of a waterfall, waiting patiently for salmon to leap into range, before catching them mid-air in their jaws. Other bears did not fish, but collected fishy remnants lying on the bank. We watched fights between bears, roaring at each other, using claws and teeth, to contest the prime fishing spots.

From a boat off shore, we saw a solitary black bear eating barnacles on coastal rocks. Humpback and fin whales spouted and breached. Sea lions and harbour seals bobbed and dived in the calm waters. Overhead, eagles soared.

The Great Bear Rainforest has been described as one of the wildest places in North America. The spirit bears are indeed wondrous and rare – there are perhaps fewer than two hundred. We felt lucky and privileged to witness such a magical environment and such wonderful animals.



The wolf waits on the shore, watching the deer in the water

But on our last afternoon, that state of elation was destroyed by a disturbing incident which raised important ethical questions. We were cruising on a boat, looking for wildlife on the shore of an island when a message came over the ship's radio that a wolf had been spotted. There was also mention of "deer bait". Our Gitga'at guide rapidly turned the boat round and sped towards the wolf. Three other boats were already there. A single coastal wolf was standing on a rock, looking out to sea. In the water in front of us, a black-tailed deer was swimming for its life across the channel, away from the shore, to escape the wolf. Our guide repeatedly steered the boat close to the deer. Twice, the boat forced the deer back onto land, and into the forest. The second time, the wolf succeeded in biting the deer's haunch. Although the deer again escaped into the sea, it was fatally weakened by an hour's effort trying to escape the wolf and the boats, and by the injury to its haunch. It slipped under water and drowned.

There is no doubt that the aim of our guide was, literally, to drive the deer into the jaws of the wolf so that we could take better photographs. It may be that part of his purpose was to promote local wolf-spotting expeditions in the Rainforest which he mentioned immediately afterwards.



The black tailed deer swimming for its life

Many would argue that it is not for an outsider, least of all a European white man, to tell First Nation people how to live their lives. I agree. Had the deer merely been hunted by the wolf, that would have been nature at work. Had the deer been cleanly and painlessly shot to provide food, unless I were a vegan, which I am not, I would have been in no position to criticise. In the grand scheme of things, the death of one deer is unimportant. However, under section 445 of the Canadian Criminal Code, it is a criminal offence to wilfully cause unnecessary pain, suffering or injury to an animal. That offence carries a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment.

Equally importantly, the incident revealed a deep hypocrisy. Throughout the trip, we heard about the care and stewardship of the Gitga'at Nation for their unique environment. That is something which I recognise, respect and support. However, what we witnessed was a deliberate interference with nature. There are inevitably conflicts of interest between the financial motives of logging and mining companies on the one hand and conservation interests on the other. But, did we witness a conflict of interest between supposedly ethical tourism and the financial motives of those who promote it? Is it inevitable that a desire to maximise financial gain will overcome and corrupt environmental concerns? Was this an isolated incident, or was it part of a pattern to attract wolves to a location where tourists will see them? Will this incident generate a Pavlovian response in the wolf, so that whenever it hears the motor of a tourist boat, it will come out of the forest onto the shore, where it can be photographed by tourists, in the expectation of food? Should there be greater regulation of tour providers or undercover monitoring during such tours? I am still troubled by these difficult, unanswered, questions.