

Ten or more black bears found guarding B.C. pot farm

BY JES ABEITA, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 18, 2010 6:26 PM



Police on the scene of the grow-op near Christina Lake in B.C.

Photograph by: Handout, RCMP

Police investigating an outdoor pot farm at Christina Lake stumbled across a strange menagerie of guards.

Between 10 and fifteen amiable black bears popped out of the Kootenay woods to greet the officers, Sgt. Fred Mansveld said.

They were extraordinarily docile and mellow, Mansveld said.

And they weren't the only unusual tenants on the property.

Police discovered more than 1,000 marijuana plants; about a dozen big black bears, some with cubs; a young raccoon; a pot-bellied pig; a large dog; and two human residents, who some people were feeding dog food to the bears to lure them into hanging out on the property, RCMP Const. Dave Smith said.

“It was like a cross between Jurassic Park and Jellystone Park,” Smith said.

The pot farm and its inhabitants were discovered when police executed a warrant on the property July 30, though the story didn’t develop legs until this week.

“Common behaviour of a bear is usually to avoid humans,” Smith said. “The ones that are used to people are quite wary of you, they don’t just sit there and watch you, and these bears were just sitting around, laying around just watching, wandering around,” he said.

One relaxed bear hopped up on a police cruiser to watch the action as the police dismantled the marijuana-growing operation.

Two houses were located on the property. In the first house a raccoon was dozing, “spread-eagled on the bed, like a cat,” Smith said.

The raccoon woke up and followed officers around as they searched the house. Smith said it had to be shooed away when it started rooting through a box of evidence.

In the other house, a pot-bellied pig slept right through the search, Smith said.

The human couple, a man and a woman, will face charges of production and possession of marijuana, Mansveld said.

Smith and Mansveld said the bears could have been fed to encourage them to stick close to the property to discourage a “rip” or theft of the plants by other criminals.

But Smith said the story has taken on mythical aspects as it makes the media rounds.

For example, there was an electric fence around the two residences and the bears did not go into the houses as suggested in some reports, he said.

Almost as soon as the story broke earlier this week, comment boards on news websites lit up with suggestions the bears were being fed marijuana along with dog food. “No, we don’t know about that,” Mansveld said. “I suppose it’s possible, but we don’t have any evidence of that.

“But it might be the reason for their laid-back attitude,” he added.

Conservation officer Dave Webster said he doubted the bears were getting anything more than a steady food source. “Lack of activity is more likely due to the fact that they’re getting a large amount of food in the area and feel completely comfortable there,” he said. “There’s really no need for them to act in a more natural way.”

“We saw no evidence they were consuming the plants,” Smith said.

In addition to drug charges, the couple may face charges of feeding wildlife, according to Webster. But he doubted the bears were being encouraged to help guard the pot farm. He thought it was more likely “misguided good intent” and added that it wasn’t the first time conservation officers had been called out to the property because the residents were feeding bears.

What becomes of the bears depends on whether they easily return to their natural habitat and food sources, Webster said.

“Once those bears don’t have that food source, we’ll see which bears move on and can adapt to more natural settings. And the bears that can’t, we’ll have to deal with those bears accordingly as those issues arise,” he said.

That could turn farce into tragedy. Bears that lose the ability to find natural food sources are far more likely to come into conflict with humans, and “any bear deemed a safety risk to the public will have to be destroyed,” Webster said.

Christina Lake is in B.C.’s southern Interior, about 21 km east of Grand Forks.

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