



# The Spirit Bear

## **About the Spirit Bear**

The spirit bear is part of the Kermode bear subspecies (who have both black and white coats), a rare subspecies of coastal black bear that diverged from inland populations, roughly 300,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> The spirit bear is known for its white coat, which is caused by a double recessive gene expressed in one out of every ten Kermode bears.<sup>2</sup> Spirit bears are genetically distinct in expressing this unique trait, and as such are neither albino nor related to polar bears.<sup>2</sup> According to Tsimshian legend, along with its white coat, the spirit bear (or *Moksgm'ol*) was given unique powers, and was therefore highly regarded and protected by Aboriginal communities in the area.<sup>3</sup> Today, there are less than 200 spirit bears left in the world, living solely in coastal British Columbia.<sup>4</sup> It is unknown why Kermode bears only exist on the few islands on the coast of BC, but in order to someday unlock this mystery we must sustain the delicate ecological balance that produces the white bear.

The spirit bear shares a complex relationship with the old-growth temperate rainforest. Spirit bears rely on the forest in many ways. For example, forest tree roots and canopies protect salmon streams (their main food source) by preventing soil erosion [<http://janegoodall.ca/planet-reef/WaterandForests.html>] and landslides, and the hollows of trunks provide ideal hibernating and denning (cub rearing) habitat.<sup>5</sup> In turn, the spirit bear deposits a significant amount of salmon carcasses on the forest floor, which provides vital nutrients for the forest to grow and regenerate.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the forest and the spirit bear is mutually beneficial, and particularly important in sustaining the entire wilderness. This complex and interconnected relationship affects many other organisms within the world's last large area of intact and unprotected temperate rainforest ecosystem, and thus the protection of the spirit bear and its habitat will consequently protect many other species as well.<sup>5</sup>

## **Why the Spirit Bear is Threatened**

The spirit bear's greatest threat is the loss of habitat due to logging.<sup>5</sup> Road building and tree harvesting methods used on this ecologically sensitive terrain removes potential hibernation and denning sites and feeding grounds for spirit bears.<sup>5</sup> This vital habitat is even compromised when areas are reforested, as one or two fast-growing commercial tree species replace the natural diversity and are consecutively harvested before they are allowed to mature, in order to maximize profits.<sup>6</sup> Logging also leads to increased soil erosion [<http://janegoodall.ca/planet-reef/WaterandForests.html>], which causes damage to salmon streams and decreases salmon populations, thus depleting a vital food source for the spirit bear.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, salmon are being over-fished and are unprotected by legislation, thereby further depleting salmon stocks.<sup>7</sup>

Related to the direct loss of habitat, the destruction of surrounding habitats also threatens the survival of the spirit bear.<sup>8</sup> As surrounding forest areas on the adjacent mainland are deforested, black bears seek refuge in Kermode bear territory, which increases competition for resources.<sup>8</sup> Black bears can also interbreed with the Kermode bear subspecies, diluting the recessive white gene in the gene pool, and making the occurrence of spirit bears less and less frequent.<sup>8</sup>

Another threat to the survival of the spirit bear is the Trophy Hunt of bears in BC. Black Kermode bears (often carriers of the white gene) remain the target of trophy hunters, even in protected forest areas.<sup>9</sup> The future of the spirit bear depends on a healthy gene pool, which requires a healthy population of both the white and black Kermode bears.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the trophy hunt is contributing to the encroachment of the Kermode range by the grizzly bear.<sup>9</sup> Not only does the grizzly create competition for salmon, it also kills the spirit bear, targeting the spirit bear as a nuisance and prey.<sup>9</sup>

All these factors, combined with the spirit bear's low reproductive rate, are threatening the existence of the spirit bear and the world's last large intact temperate rainforest.<sup>5</sup> The necessary measures must be taken now, in order to ensure the future of the spirit bear and its delicate ecosystem are protected.

### **What Needs to be Done**

Fortunately, there is great potential to ensure a thriving future for the spirit bear. Thanks to the efforts of environmental organizations such as the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition [<http://www.spiritbearyouth.org>], First Nations communities and the public, the BC provincial government has become increasingly engaged and committed to the protection of this species.<sup>10</sup> Currently, due to recent legislation, more ecologically sensitive logging practices are now enforced in the Great Bear Rainforest, and two-thirds of the spirit bear's habitat has been protected.<sup>8</sup> However, there are so few spirit bears remaining in such a small territory, that these measures alone may not provide enough protection for spirit bear populations.<sup>8</sup>

At the very minimum, the remaining third of spirit bear habitat must be protected from all forms of logging, and ideally, this protected area should expand beyond the habitat of the spirit bear.<sup>8</sup> This expansion is necessary to prevent the displacement of bears in surrounding areas who could potentially encroach on spirit bear territory.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, while it is illegal to hunt white Kermode bears (i.e. spirit bears), the Trophy Hunt in BC continues and the killing of grizzly bears, black bears, and black Kermode bears threatens the future of the spirit bear.<sup>9</sup>

### **Actions You Can Take**

Since the spirit bear's entire range makes up only 4% of the Great Bear Rainforest, it seems very reasonable to ask the British Columbia government to conserve the remaining third of the spirit bear habitat which currently remains unprotected. The government of BC has repeatedly promised that it will take the necessary measures to conserve the spirit bear, and it is up to you

to hold them to their promise. Write to the Premier of British Columbia, Gordon Campbell, and remind him that he has a promise to keep, in ensuring the survival of the spirit bear and its habitat.

At this time, the most effective way to get your voice heard will be to mail all your personalized letters to Simon Jackson, founder of the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition [<http://www.spiritbearyouth.org>] (address below). Letters will be collected, and when the time is right, the mass of letters will be collectively delivered to Premier Campbell. This will create a strong and impactful message to the Premier, showing him that youth all around the country are concerned about the survival of the spirit bear. If you prefer, you can write directly to Premier Campbell, the BC Minister of Agriculture and Lands, or Prime Minister Harper and Environment Minister Prentice. Remember to decrease your impact on the spirit bear's habitat and the rest of our Canadian forests [<http://janegoodall.ca/planet-releaf/CanadasForests.html>], and use 100% recycled paper for your letters!

Stop the Trophy Hunt! Get your voice heard and sign the Faltering Light Petition [<http://www.janegoodall.ca/roots-shoots-news.php#TrophyHunt>], your name will appear in a photo book [[http://www.cold-coast.com/section55155\\_303063.html](http://www.cold-coast.com/section55155_303063.html)] that will be sent to the Premier and Environment Minister of BC, and spread the word to stop the hunt!

You can also contribute to the campaigns of other organizations that are advocating for the conservation of the spirit bear and its habitat. Please visit their websites below and get involved to help them reach their goals!

### Who to Contact

Send your personalized letter addressed to Premier Campbell, to be delivered by the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition:

Spirit Bear Youth Coalition  
PO Box 91933  
West Vancouver, BC  
V7V 4S4  
E-mail: [letters@spiritbearyouth.org](mailto:letters@spiritbearyouth.org)

Send a letter to the Premier of British Columbia:

Premier Gordon Campbell  
Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, BC  
V8V 1X4

Send a letter to the BC Minister of Agriculture and Lands:

Hon. Steve Thomson  
Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, BC  
V8V 1X4

Send a letter to the Prime Minister:

Prime Minister Stephen Harper  
Office of the Prime Minister  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 0A2

Send a letter to the federal Minister of Environment:

Hon. Jim Prentice  
Les Terrasses de la Chaudiere  
10 Wellington St., 28th Floor  
Hull, PQ  
K1A 0H3

Send a letter to your Federal MP or Minister:

Visit Canada's Parliamentary site

[\[http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/senatorsmembers\\_cabinet.asp?Language=E&Parl=37&Ses=2&Sect=mincur\]](http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/senatorsmembers_cabinet.asp?Language=E&Parl=37&Ses=2&Sect=mincur)

for information about MPs and Ministers

House of Commons,  
Parliament Buildings,  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A6

### Campaigns to Join

Spirit Bear Youth Coalition:

- Send a letter to Premier Campbell: [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=13](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=13)
- Become a SBYC Member and stay up to date on events: [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=14](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=14)
- Become a SBYC Education Member: [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=15](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=15)
- Learn more by watching videos and look out for the upcoming movie:  
[http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=5](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=5)
- Buy a gift or make a donation: [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=16](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=16)
- Contribute to the blog: <http://www.spiritbearyouth.org/blogspot/>

Valhalla Wilderness Society:

- Send a message to Premier Campbell:  
<http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/become/fax.html>
- Become a member and make a donation:  
[http://www.vws.org/action/print\\_form.html](http://www.vws.org/action/print_form.html)
- Sign up for the e-Newsletter to stay informed: <http://www.vws.org/index.html#email>

The Sierra Club BC:

- Join or start a Local Group: <http://www.sierraclub.bc.ca/local-groups/local-groups>

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- <sup>1</sup> [http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about\\_bear/index.html](http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about_bear/index.html)
  - <sup>2</sup> <http://www.bearlife.org/kermode-bear.html>
  - <sup>3</sup> [http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about\\_bear/science\\_info.html](http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about_bear/science_info.html)
  - <sup>4</sup> [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=12](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=12)
  - <sup>5</sup> [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=4](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=4)
  - <sup>6</sup> [http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about\\_bear/science\\_info.html](http://www.vws.org/project/spiritbear/about_bear/science_info.html)
  - <sup>7</sup> [http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:fDRFUGg-6AJ:genetics.forestry.ubc.ca/ritland/kermode/blood\\_report.doc+declining+salmon+stocks+and+the+spirit+bear&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ca&client=firefox-a](http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:fDRFUGg-6AJ:genetics.forestry.ubc.ca/ritland/kermode/blood_report.doc+declining+salmon+stocks+and+the+spirit+bear&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ca&client=firefox-a)
  - <sup>8</sup> [http://74.54.116.9/?page\\_id=6](http://74.54.116.9/?page_id=6)
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://74.54.116.9/?p=650>
  - <sup>10</sup> [http://www.savethegreatbear.org/files/gbr\\_update\\_nov09](http://www.savethegreatbear.org/files/gbr_update_nov09)