



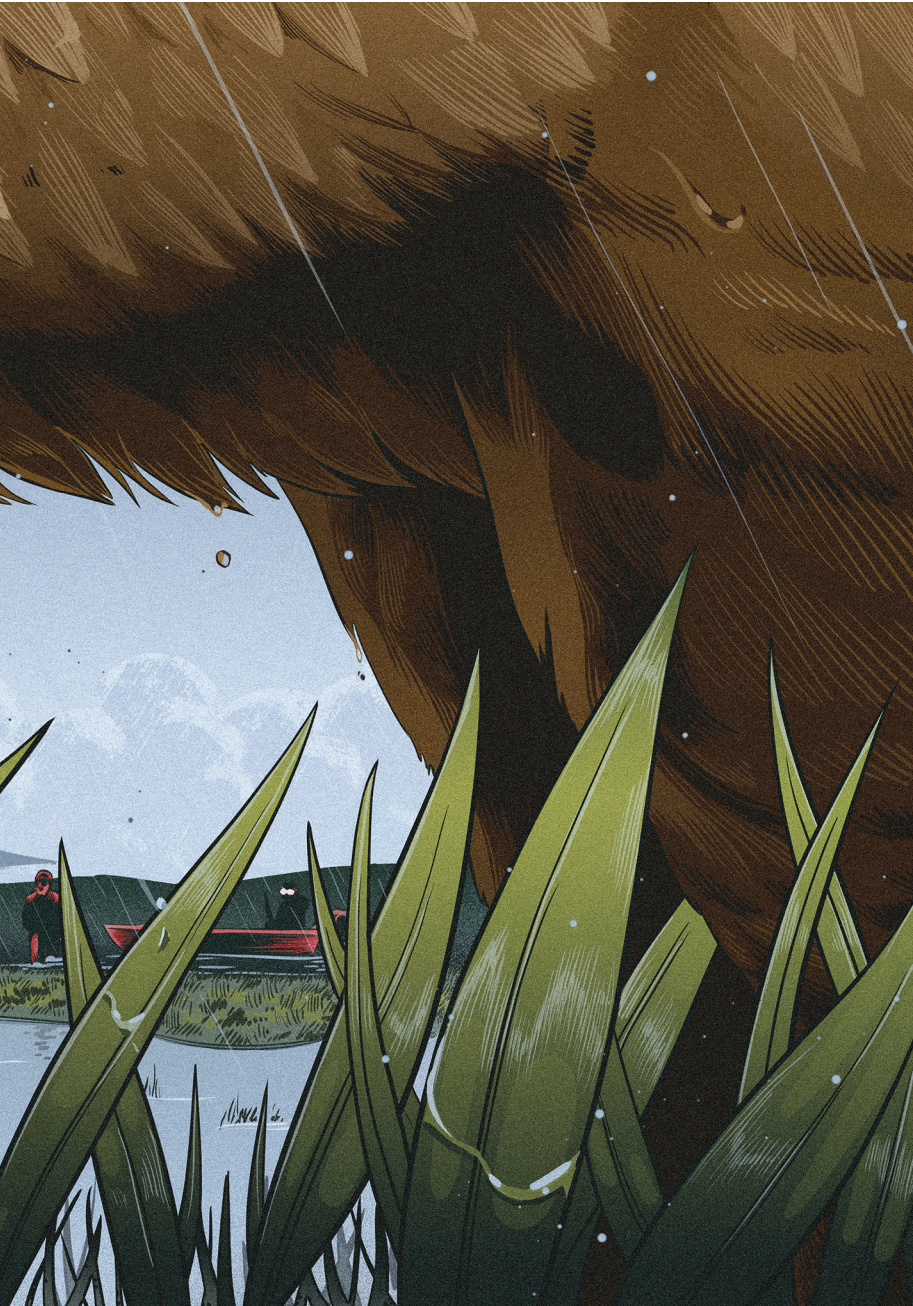
ENVIRONMENT

# Bear Market

*The controversial business of hunting grizzlies in British Columbia*

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**W**HEN THE GRIZZLY FALLS, it does so silently. Rain and the reverberation of a gunshot mask what should be the tremendous sound of the 900-pound body collapsing into the shallow water of the estuary. Clad in camouflage, Steve West raises a triumphant fist as smoke billows out of his .50-calibre muzzleloader. “Ooh, Bob, that’s a nice bear,” he says to Bob Milligan, an outfitter West has hired to guide him on this hunt, who’s operating a metal skiff in the river behind him.

It’s a cool evening in June 2012, the sun sinking behind the cedar-peaked mountains of the northern reaches of the Great Bear Rainforest, as the pair wade through the grassy estuary toward West’s trophy. Milligan, who, for more than twenty-five years, owned one of British Columbia’s most notorious and valuable guide-outfitting businesses, grabs the bear’s dinner-plate-sized paw and holds it against West’s hand. A bear like this can make anyone feel small. West reaches down into the tidewater and hoists up the grizzly’s head by its wet ears to reveal the animal’s face for the cameraman filming the hunt. West hosts a TV show, *Steve’s Outdoor Adventures*, on the Outdoor Channel. “That’s what it’s all about right there!” he says.

West grew up hunting for meat—deer and elk, mainly—and made his first foray into trophy hunting in the 1990s. In addition to hosting his show, he also works as a booking agent for extravagant expeditions in Canada and the United States, making him a big name in the business. Over the years, he has hunted the world: oryx in Namibia, water buffalo in Australia, and muskox in the Northwest Territories. “Grizzlies are hunted because they’re a challenge,” West explains, standing in his wood-panelled office in La Grande, Oregon, as a cameraman records our interview on West’s behalf. Amid threats on social media and irate phone calls, he has become wary about being taken out of context on such a flashpoint topic. “There’s the man versus bear thing that comes into play,” he continues. “Yeah, I’ve got a gun or a boat....I’m holding an advantage of weaponry, but there’s still an element of danger.”

For decades, West was one of several hundred trophy hunters who ventured into BC’s forests each year in hopes of bagging a grizzly. His 2012 bear was his first taken in the province, and it set a record: the largest grizzly ever to be killed with a muzzleloader—a gun that’s loaded through the barrel. BC, along with the Yukon and Alaska, was one of only three places left in North America where hunters could legally kill grizzly bears for sport.

But on November 30, 2017, BC’s newly instated NDP government put an end to the grizzly bear trophy hunt throughout the province, fulfilling one of its campaign promises. The decision was largely hailed

as a victory. The debate over hunting grizzly bears in the province had long been waged along political and moral lines. For many, the trophy hunters who killed a few hundred bears every year were barbaric. But some Indigenous communities in the province relied on the income; a single hunt often totalled tens of thousands of dollars in revenue for communities with few options for economic development. For these communities, the issue has not been one of conservation versus decimation but of lost livelihoods and uncertain futures.

MUCH OF THE ideological fight over the grizzly bear trophy hunt has played out not in British Columbia's interior, where a higher concentration of the province's animals have been killed, but in the Great Bear Rainforest. Known as the mid- and north-coast timber supply areas before being renamed by conservation biologists to make the region sound more provocative for environmental protection, the ecoregion is the jewel of BC's rugged coast where white "spirit" bears and sea wolves roam. The 6.4 million hectares of lush Sitka spruce forests, grassy river estuaries, and isolated inlets and islands running from the tip of Vancouver Island to the Alaska panhandle were formally protected by the provincial government in 2016, placing 85 percent of the ecoregion's old-growth forests off limits to logging. With trees largely protected, activists turned to the ecoregion's namesake: bears.

First Nations have long shared the same estuaries, rivers, and foods with these animals. Elders say that if a person ever becomes lost in the forest, to survive, they should eat everything a bear does—salmonberries, silverweed, chocolate lily, northern rice root—save for skunk cabbage. In one story, bears have the ability to take off their fur and become human. In dance, myth, and legend, the grizzly bear reigns—serving as mother, protector, and medicine man, according to various nations' stories. The animal is revered but also hunted—rarely for food but often for its long, curved claws and its skins, which are fashioned into ceremonial crowns and coarse fur capes.

For decades, partly because BC has one of the largest populations of grizzly bears in North America and partly because of the province's natural splendour in which the bears live, hunters—often men from

oil-rich states and provinces, including Texas, Oklahoma, and Alberta—have been drawn to the forests and mountains of BC in search of its kings. But today, the biggest peril faced by bears isn't camouflaged hunters. A report by the BC Auditor General, released a month before the trophy-hunting ban came into effect, found that "human activities that degrade grizzly bear habitat," including forestry and oil and gas development, were the greatest threat to the province's bears. The report also found that some bear populations in the province were increasing.

Trophy hunting has long been a lucrative industry in BC. In 2001, grizzlies

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were granted a brief reprieve when NDP premier Ujjal Dosanjh implemented what was supposed to be a three-year moratorium on trophy hunting ahead of a provincial election. Liberal leader Gordon Campbell called the moratorium "a crass political scheme aimed at selling out rural British Columbians to buy urban votes." The moratorium lasted only five months. When the Liberals ousted the NDP, the hunt resumed. Underpinning such back-and-forth political battles has largely been the adherence to "the best available science"—or lack thereof. According to the provincial government, there are roughly 15,000 grizzly bears in BC today, more than half of Canada's total grizzly population—but no one knows for sure. Bears are challenging and expensive to count; only 15 percent of grizzly populations in the province have ever been counted in a census.

Based in the coastal community of Bella Bella in the Great Bear Rainforest, in Heiltsuk territory, biologist Kyle Artelle

has studied the management of the province's grizzly bear populations for nearly a decade. In a 2013 paper, Artelle and his team found that between 2001 and 2011, more grizzlies were killed than the province deemed sustainable in half of all hunted populations in BC. However, a 2016 research paper authored by BC government scientists and published in *The Journal of Wildlife Management* said that "the hypothesis that the grizzly bear hunt has been unsustainable was not supported by our investigation of available information," although it acknowledged the need for more research.

"[The government] doesn't have very good data on population estimates," Artelle says. "These things are really important when you're wondering how many bears can die without the population decreasing." Another study he led, published in March, found "limited support for the assumption that wildlife management in North America is guided by science. Most management systems lacked indications of the basic elements of a scientific approach to management."

For Lee Foote, a hunter who has taught wildlife resource utilization at the University of Alberta, there's nothing wrong with the idea of protecting grizzlies in the Great Bear Rainforest to conserve an intact ecosystem holistically. "If that were really the case, I could support the closure of hunting in that area," he says. "But I think what's driving this is a Disneyfication and a sentimentality that's not grounded in reality." Foote, who served on the sustainable-use-and-livelihoods committee for the International Union for Conservation of Nature, believes the ban on grizzly hunting won't lead to any conservation gains for the species but rather a slow degradation of human tolerance for bears as the animal will now hold an intrinsic rather than a specific value.

Such considerations didn't sway the new BC government. With no consensus on the health of the grizzly bear population, the hunt being positioned in media as an affront to First Nations in BC, and anti-trophy-hunting sentiment reaching a tipping point, the NDP announced the ban, crediting public intolerance rather than science. "This action is supported by the vast majority of people across our province," said Doug Donaldson, minister of

forests, lands, natural resource operations, and rural development, in a press release sent out last August. While activists in BC and elsewhere rejoiced, those living in the remote communities most impacted by the ban felt differently.

**T**HE NISGA'A FIRST NATION lies at the northern edge of the Great Bear Rainforest in a valley that makes no secret of its volcanic history. The rutted ribbon of Highway 113 winds through ancient lava beds from Canada's most recent

a grizzly bear quota was operating under specific rules set in 1996 by the provincial government.

Like a timber company that acquires rights to cut trees off Crown land, guide outfitters purchased exclusive hunting rights from the provincial government, for up to twenty-five years. Based on the size of their hunting territory and health of the grizzly population, each guide outfitter received an exclusive quota every five years from their regional fish, wildlife, and habitat manager for how many bears

used to run lodges, purchase speedboats and trucks, and pay staff.

The Nisga'a Nation assumed, like everyone else with a bear quota in the province, that when the ban came into effect, it would lose an integral part of its business, investments, and incomes. But it also had another way to hunt bears. In 1998, the Nisga'a Nation signed a treaty with the federal and provincial governments, which, two years later, returned to the nation the power to make its own laws and hold authority over the land and assets within the roughly 202,000 hectares it now controlled. In addition, the treaty provided the Nisga'a with \$196.1 million, primarily in federal funds, to be paid over the following fifteen years, plus allocations of salmon, moose, and "other wildlife species"—including bears—outside of provincial regulations.

In order to realize the full terms of their treaty, the Nisga'a turned to the person who owned the hunting rights to a portion of their territory: Bob Milligan. In 1989, Milligan had inherited the rights for almost 7,000 hectares of wilderness that stretched from the lichen-covered lava beds of the Nass Valley, south to the city of Terrace, and west to the Pacific



eruption in the seventeenth century past sulphur hot springs, Lava Lake, and the dormant Tseax cinder cone. It is a region where forces of nature and humans have warred over space that's plagued by overlapping powers.

"Grizzly hunts are the most profitable hunts that we do," says Harry Nyce Jr., CEO of Nisga'a Pacific Ventures, as he reclines at the boardroom table in his office in Gitlaxt'aamiks, one of the four villages in the Nisga'a Nation. Copies of *Huntin' Fool* and *Mountain Hunter* magazines, featuring images of big men holding big animals, cascade neatly across the table. As CEO, Nyce oversees many of the Nisga'a Nation's commercial operations in fishing, logging, and tourism, including Nisga'a Guide Outfitting, its hunting venture. When the ban was announced, every one of BC's 112 licensed guide-outfitting companies—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous owned—that held

they could take. During a set province-wide spring hunting season, and an additional fall season in BC's northern and coastal areas, grizzlies could be hunted in one of two ways. The first required residents of the province to apply for a grizzly bear tag via a lottery. Every year, approximately 170 tags were awarded to residents, who were able to head out into the woods alone and bag one bear. The second required non-residents to hire a guide outfitter to lead them into the wilderness to legally kill a bear.

For each multi-day grizzly hunt, outfitters charged up to \$30,000 in fees, for accommodation, transportation, and guide services, in addition to a \$1,030 licence fee that went to the province. While each guide territory hosted hunts for many big-game species, grizzlies often made up more than half of revenue for outfitters—money that would then be

Ocean and Alaska-BC border. While most guide outfitters were allotted between five and ten grizzlies in their five-year quotas, Milligan held fifty—the largest quota in the province. His services were in high demand. "I've got a guy from Alberta who wants to come," said Milligan, five weeks before the ban went into effect. "He's been trying for years to get a grizzly."

With anti-trophy-hunting sentiment rising in Canada and abroad (peaking with the worldwide backlash that followed the death of Cecil the lion at the hands of an American dentist in Zimbabwe in July 2015), Milligan says he anticipated a turning of the tide. He was also facing a lawsuit from the province's Civil Forfeiture Office that alleged he had committed eight offences under BC's Wildlife and Land Acts, including using a helicopter illegally to transport hunters. In 2015, he opted to sell—coming to a deal, for an undisclosed

sum, with the Nisga'a. The nation hired Milligan back on contract to continue running grizzly trophy hunts on its behalf.

"When we launched Nisga'a Guide Outfitting we were asked what this represents, because there is an understanding the grizzly is a cultural icon of ours," Nyce says. "One of the Nisga'a laws is respect for one another and a respect for the land... and that means conducting ourselves, our business, and our hunt in a respectful manner." The Nisga'a Nation could hunt grizzlies through the same quota system under which other outfitters operated and also through the allocation laid out in its treaty. But the provincial government's initial ban announcement didn't make any distinction between the two, leading to a flurry of negotiations about the integrity of their treaty in the weeks that followed. "When you have a revenue stream that is severed or cut or diminished, obviously that is going to hurt the business," says Nyce. "And that is the impact of this policy change." Still, the Nisga'a's hunt, as the only guided grizzly hunt in the Great Bear Rainforest ecoregion offered by a First Nation, sparked tension among other nations down coast.

DOUG NEASLOSS waits for his sea plane at Klemtu's tourism dock, luggage piled high on the floating wooden planks. On this September evening, Neasloss is scheduled to attend Night of the Grizzly in Vancouver, the non-profit Grizzly Bear Foundation's inaugural fundraising event. As elected chief councillor of the Kitsoo/Xai'xais First Nation, he is accepting the first-ever Grizzly Champion Award on behalf of Coastal First Nations (CFN)—an alliance of nine nations in BC committed to ecotourism over hunting—for the "advancement of the well-being of grizzly bears through their efforts to terminate the hunt of grizzly bears in the Great Bear Rainforest."

The fundraiser, conceived prior to the NDP's announcement of the ban, will be a victory party of sorts. "I would imagine quite a few of the trophy hunters are upset," Neasloss says, satisfaction underlining his words. He represents a sea change in coastal communities; for over a decade, he has championed not only the protection of the natural environment but also economic development and opportunities for Indigenous peoples in the region. In 1999, he helped launch Spirit Bear Lodge out of a red-roofed float house that has grown

into a multi-million-dollar operation employing some fifty people and has transformed the 450-person Kitsoo/Xai'xais nation into the region's ecotourism hub. Understandably, the nation is keen to protect its investment; if trophy hunters jeopardize the health of the grizzly population, or turn tourists away, bear-viewing operations could suffer.

Though the majority of BC's First Nations never signed treaties that ceded their land rights, the BC government still exerted legal jurisdiction and, therefore, retained control of selling hunting territory rights and establishing quotas. If anti-hunting First Nations in the Great Bear Rainforest wanted to close the hunt across the ecoregion, they needed to buy out the outfitters that held the hunting rights.

In 2005, the nine First Nations of CFN, including Kitsoo/Xai'xais, partnered with Raincoast, a Vancouver Island-based environmental advocacy group, to raise \$1.3 million to purchase a 2.5-million-hectare hunting territory around Bella Coola from a guide outfitter. (The partnership later bought two more territories, bringing its total to more than 3 million hectares off limits to grizzly hunting prior to the ban.) In the

late 2000s, Milligan negotiated with the alliance but scoffed at its measly offering—ten cents on the dollar of the value of the territory. Only those in dire financial straits would ever consider such a deal, Milligan said. Neasloss, however, says CFN offered “fair market value” for hunting rights in territories along the coast, but once guide outfitters realized the nations wouldn’t hunt the bears, they began asking for a premium. For those who valued the continuation of trophy hunting, selling would undercut their pursuit. CFN rejected the guide outfitters’ counter-offers and waited for a switch of government. The ban meant the alliance could achieve its goal without paying another dime. Neasloss is glad. “They played hardball a bit too long,” he says. “And that’s their own fault.”

One of the long-standing arguments used to justify the hunt by guide outfitters and trophy hunters is that fees trickle down to wildlife conservation. In BC, the government collects approximately \$12 million each year from all hunting licences, most of which goes to general revenue, of which around \$2.6 million is put aside annually for conservation work. But CFN says those figures pale in

comparison to what ecotourism provides for its region and its people. A 2014 report by the Center for Responsible Travel found that grizzly bear and black bear trophy hunts in the Great Bear Rainforest brought in approximately \$1.2 million in 2012, compared to fifty-three bear-viewing operations that directly employed 510 people and made \$15.1 million. In the Great Bear Rainforest, however, the revenue from ecotourism is spread out among many stakeholders.

The Nisga’a Nation, along with the other Indigenous-owned and -operated outfitters in the province’s interior that had grizzly quotas, saw a more consolidated return on its hunting ventures. And, though the ban originated from environmental movements within the Great Bear Rainforest, its impact reaches far beyond its borders, where revenue from hunts is far greater than \$1.2 million. For guide outfitters that will lose their grizzly quotas, the NDP has made no promise of financial compensation. (During the three-month moratorium in 2001, the province paid out \$1.35 million for lost revenue as compensation.) Instead, the province has offered to provide transition assistance to guide outfitters to change

their focus, the most likely alternative being ecotourism. But those who ran grizzly hunts in BC’s interior face a greater challenge in attracting bear-viewing tourists because their regions don’t have the same natural splendour offered by the world-renowned fjords and estuaries of the coast nor do they have rare spirit bears that serve as the main draw for visitors to the Great Bear Rainforest. Elsewhere, a gun is so easily replaced by a camera.

WHENEVER Andrew Robinson drives from Terrace to the Nisga’a village of Laxgalts’ap, he counts the bears. “You can get twenty to thirty black and grizzly bears just in those 137 kilometres,” he says while peering out the back door of the village’s government building. And that’s not including the number of totem bears that adorn cedar poles throughout the Nass Valley. “We watch bears run up the side of the mountain chasing goats. We watch grizzlies in the river chase moose calves while we’re fishing for salmon,” says Robinson, chief administrative officer of the village. “We just had a bear come up to the back of a lady’s house while she was making pies.”

His point is that his nation has always co-existed with bears. The animals are no less of a cultural emblem to the Nisga'a—despite its support of trophy hunting—than they are to any of the other First Nations down coast. “We have sophisticated cultures and relationships and trade networks that aren't going to go to the wayside to accommodate some tourism industry—some romanticized reflection of what Indigenous people are supposed to be,” he says. Robinson, one of the founders of Nisga'a Guide Outfitting, is known as a bit of a sweet talker, but an effective one who has brought in thousands of investment dollars to the nation. Its crown jewel is the glass-walled \$14 million Nisga'a Museum, which houses seven grizzly crowns.

In that way, Robinson and Neasloss aren't so different—two charismatic leaders in their nations who are working to create better opportunities for their people, even if their strategies are at odds. Robinson is also keen to develop the tourism industry in Nisga'a territory, but a part of that is about accommodation and services that will attract more hunters. For years, Robinson and Bob Milligan travelled to Las Vegas, swapping rainforest for desert, to

attend the annual Safari Club International hunters' convention. On these business trips, they've met members of the Navajo and Apache tribes from the four-corners region of the US who run trophy hunts for elk, mule deer, and desert bighorn sheep and include cultural immersion for hunters coming to their tribal lands. Robinson hopes to launch something similar in the Nass.

Unemployment in the Nisga'a Nation hovers around 30 percent among a population of 7,400. There are no fast-food restaurants for young people to gain easy employment and experience. Nisga'a Guide Outfitting represents an alternative future for the underemployed. In school, some young men (it is most often men who become guide outfitters) are studying wildlife management in hopes of obtaining guiding jobs one day; Milligan has recently hired one young Nisga'a man, and the nation had planned to hire another two. Moreover, the grizzly trophy hunt had represented just under half of Nisga'a Guide Outfitters's total annual profits, potentially bringing in approximately \$250,000 of revenue—based on the number of bears they were allowed to hunt each year—of which only a quarter went to expenses. “It's a lean,

efficient machine,” Nyce says. In turn, that money is scheduled to be invested in housing development and renovations in the communities. “When it comes down to it, trophy hunting is a very important industry to our people,” Robinson says.

Pulling in big numbers from hunting has not been without a social cost. The Nisga'a are sometimes seen as money-driven outcasts among other nations in the Great Bear Rainforest. And big cities haven't been any kinder. “These urban centres can collect all the money from natural resources being harvested, but they get mad whenever anybody else tries to do anything,” Robinson says. Those twenty to thirty bears he counts on his drive are there because the Nisga'a have conserved their habitat. “We take care of our land properly, and we take care of the bears,” he says. “How are people taking care of things in their own neck of the woods? How is industry impacting the Fraser River? How many bears are being impacted in that area and killed due to habitat degradation? Meanwhile, [Nisga'a Guide Outfitting is] being chastised about ‘sacred bears’ being hunted.”

In the wake of its speed to enact the ban, the provincial government failed to provide

meaningful alternatives to spur economic development in remote communities that have long relied on income from hunting grizzlies. It's a point of frustration for Rob-inson: "Why is it when First Nations people get their foot through the door that everybody starts chastising them for trying to have a shot at something?"

**L**AST OCTOBER, with just over a month left before the ban came into effect, outfitters were working hard to fill last-minute bookings from hunters across Canada and the US who were hoping to get a grizzly bear while they still had the chance. "You watch," said Steve West, "they're going to pound the ever-living daylights out of those grizzlies during this fall season. They're going to fill every tag." And they nearly did: 307 grizzlies were killed by hunters in 2017, with 159 during the fall hunting season—a 30 percent increase over 2016 and the highest kill count in years.

West's kills from around the world fill his Oregon office as a taxidermic menagerie. There's a mountain lion that's perched on a tree branch, and the head of a dall sheep is mounted on a wall. But it's his record

grizzly from the Great Bear Rainforest that immediately greets visitors who enter through the front door. Mounted on its haunches, the bear stands over eight feet tall, its face permanently fixed into a plastic, open-mouthed snarl. "Some people have a tie to these bears, and they feel a spiritual connection," West says. "I respect that." He believes there is room for compromise: protected areas dedicated to wildlife viewing as well as areas set aside to hunting.

In early November, after a flurry of heated phone calls and negotiations with the Nisga'a, minister Doug Donaldson conceded that "the proposal to end the trophy hunting of grizzly bears does not apply to First Nations who pursue their constitutional right to hunt, for food, social, or ceremonial purposes, or a treaty right. The province has advised the Nisga'a Nation that their treaty right to harvest grizzly bears will not be impacted by the proposal to end the trophy hunting of grizzly bears." Grizzlies, it turns out, could still be hunted in the northern end of the Great Bear Rainforest.

The Nisga'a are still hammering out details on how exactly their hunt may

continue. Other First Nations and guide outfitters are weighing options too. The Tahltan Nation in northwestern BC condemned the ban. "We have strong connections with the guide outfitters in our community and do not want to see this industry negatively impacted without adequate reasoning," Tahltan central government president Chad Norman Day wrote, noting that the ban will have "adverse impacts on our community financially, socially, and culturally." The Tahltan didn't have a grizzly quota before the ban, but other non-Indigenous-owned guide-outfitting businesses operated in their territory, bringing in money to their communities. Some nations in the interior that had grizzly quotas, such as Tsay Keh Dene Nation, say they're consulting their membership on the future of their hunts.

Even if other First Nations aren't successful in negotiating with the government to keep their trophy hunts open, guide outfitters have a strong sense the ban will prove impermanent. Bob Milligan, for one, is confident the tide will turn once the NDP loses power. "When they get ousted from government," he says, "we're going to be hunting grizzlies again." †