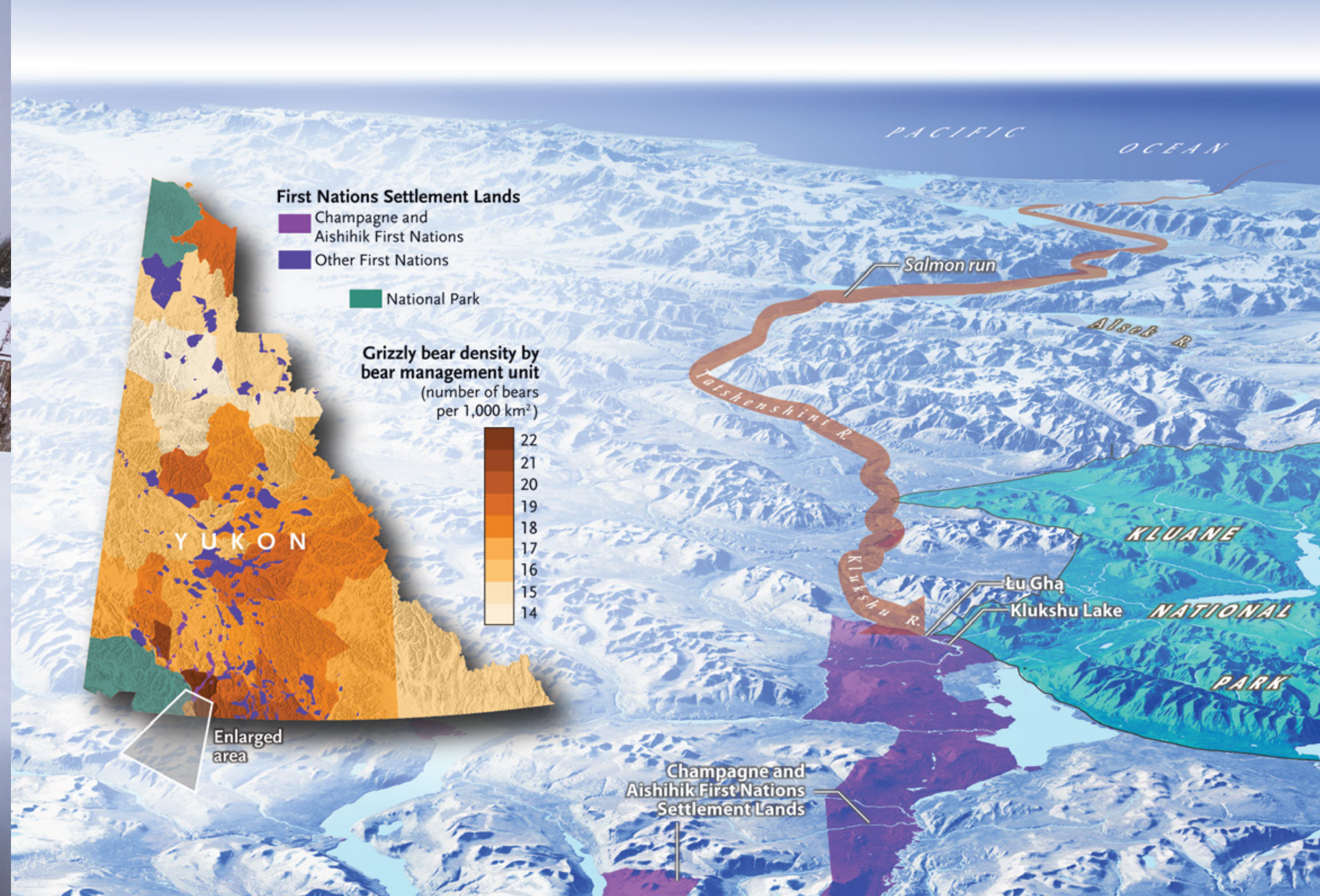
THE GOOD BEAR

THE ICE BEARS OF KLUKSHU HAVE BEEN LIVING WITH PEOPLE AND SALMON FOR MILLENNIA. IS THIS AGE-OLD BALANCE UNDER THREAT?

BY **TRINA MOYLES**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PETER MATHER**



MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO. BEAR DENSITY DATA: REVIEW OF GRIZZLY BEAR MONITORING AND MORTALITY MANAGEMENT IN THE YUKON, GOVERNMENT OF YUKON FISH AND WILDLIFE BRANCH, AUGUST 2022. LANDSAT IMAGERY: NASA, 2020. ELEVATION MODEL: JAPAN AEROSPACE EXPLORATION AGENCY (JAXA), 2024.

ON THE WALL of Chuck Hume's cabin on the bank of the Klukshu River in southwestern Yukon hangs a photograph of a dominant male grizzly bear the locals called the "Mayor." The photo was taken by Whitehorse-based wildlife photographer Peter Mather, who, with special permission from the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, documents the grizzlies along the Klukshu using remote camera-trap technology.

Hume, a Champagne Elder in Klukshu, first encountered the Mayor more than a decade ago, when the bear was about three years old, likely recently weaned from his mother. As Hume watched the bear feasting on soapberries by the road, a truck drove by and honked its horn to warn him, inadvertently spooking the bear towards him. Hume got in his truck and drove towards the village; the young bear followed.

"He was treating me like the mother bear," Hume says with a fond smile.

"He *trained* that bear," says his wife, Barb, as she pours me a cup of tea.

Hume chuckles with a twinkle in his eye. "My son says, 'we don't have to worry about bears. My dad trains them all.'"

Klukshu is in the Dezadeash bear management unit, home to one of the densest grizzly bear populations in Yukon; the territorial government estimates there are 21.4 bears per 1,000 square kilometres. It also borders Kluane National Park and Reserve, which has one of the highest densities of grizzlies in Canada at 40 bears per 1,000 square kilometres. They're drawn here by three species of salmon — king salmon, sockeye, and coho — that migrate 200 kilometres annually from the Pacific Ocean through the Tatshenshini and Alsek river basins to spawn in the Klukshu River and the outlet of Klukshu Lake.

Salmon are the reason people are here, too. Klukshu is a name derived from a Tlingit word meaning "silver salmon, end of." The Champagne and Aishihik First Nations call the village Łu Ghą, meaning "a place for fishing" in the Southern Tutchone language. It's a fishing camp they and their ancestors have used seasonally to harvest and dry sockeye salmon. Historically, people camped in tents and caught sockeye in wooden traps and with fishing gaffs from June until late September. Women processed and hung the fish to dry in smokehouses built from spruce logs. The dried salmon sustained their families and dog teams through the long winter.

Today, Klukshu is made up of small seasonal log cabins built along the riverbank. The smokehouses still stand, bleached silver from the sun, though it's rare for salmon to hang from their rafters these days.

It's September, and the golden leaves on the balsam poplar trees flutter in the wind. Standing on the wooden footbridge that spans the narrow river, I count 20, maybe 30 sockeye, rippling ruby red in the river below. While there's historical evidence that the returns of sockeye salmon have fluctuated considerably year to year — with numbers ranging from 30,000 to fewer than 10,000 — Elders say they've declined dramatically over the last century.

According to Teresa Wallace, acting senior aquatic science biologist for the Alsek River drainage with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, sockeye runs have been highly variable over the past 25 years, and it's difficult to pinpoint a reason for their surges and declines. It may be the result of changes in water temperature, spawning habitat and food availability, or a combination of factors the salmon face as they migrate.

They're also subject to commercial fishing, says Wallace, necessitating their monitoring and management in both Canada and the United States. She points to the 1985 Pacific Salmon Treaty, a framework in which both countries work together to try to ensure enough salmon escape to their spawning grounds. Wallace says Fisheries and Oceans Canada has been working closely with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations "at the table and on the ground" to monitor and manage salmon since 1976.

Grizzlies are active in Klukshu (PREVIOUS and OPPOSITE, TOP) throughout the early winter, fishing for coho and sockeye salmon (OPPOSITE, BOTTOM).

Trina Moyles (@trinariannemoyles) is an award-winning journalist and author. Her new book, Black Bear, *comes out soon. Photographer Peter Mather (@peter.mather.photography) specializes in longterm photo projects on conservation issues around his home in the Yukon.*

The century-spanning sockeye declines in Klukshu have had ecological consequences not only for the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations but for a species with which they coexist: grizzly bear, or shar shäw in the Southern Tutchone language. The community rarely addresses shar shäw by name. Instead, they refer to them with kinship and respect, with individual bears given names like "Big Grandpa" or "Brother" — or, the Mayor.

"THIS AREA has been inhabited for a long time with salmon and bears," says Hume. He grew up camping along the banks of the river and listening to the stories of his parents and grandparents, stories passed down over generations about the delicate balance between people, salmon — and bears. He points to archeological evidence of early human habitation on Champagne and Aishihik First Nations territory found in melting ice patches, including a 9,000-year-old wooden hunting dart. Indeed, Klukshu is one of the oldest examples of human-bear coexistence in North America — and it was the salmon that brought them together.

Families fished for sockeye during the day in Klukshu until the late afternoon, explains Hume. By 4 p.m. they'd "get off the creek" to give the bears a chance to feed on the running salmon. On the banks, the community would process salmon for drying — de-gilling and gutting them, and saving the head, a delicacy, to later boil or bake in the fire — and throw the scraps back into the creek for the bears and other scavengers. There was enough for everybody, including bears.

"He was treated with respect all the time," says Hume, referring to the bears.

Elder Chuck Hume (OPPOSITE) in front of his cabin on the Klukshu River. Hume has lived with bears like "the Mayor" (OPPOSITE, BELOW) his entire life. Wolves (ABOVE) also depend on late season salmon runs; Barb Hume (RIGHT) outside their smokehouse.

But lately, there have been few grizzly bear sightings along the Klukshu River during the sockeye run. As the runs decline, the "bear patterns are changing," says Hume, with the bears coming to the river later in the fall. During my visit, villagers talk not of bears but of the wolves. They can hear a resident wolf pack howling at night. There's been a sighting of the pack's pups. The wolves, Hume says, help to keep the bear population in check; the females teach their young to prey on cubs.

"My dad always said, 'you have to watch that balance between wolves and bears,'" says Hume. "You kill too many wolves, and your bear population goes up." Likewise, too few bears mean too many wolves.

Hume believes the grizzly bears are adapting to the diminishing sockeye returns by feeding on the abundance of moss and soapberries in the mountains in September, then coming to the river in October and November when the coho salmon start to run, pushing the wolves out.

SHARING THE KLUKSHU RIVER WITH BEARS COULD HAVE **POSITIVE BENEFITS** FOR BOTH ENVIRONMENT *AND* HUMANS.

"It's an interesting balance," he says. "The wolves and bears, they counteract one another, but they still know when to leave the other alone."

With warming temperatures and changing salmon patterns, Hume's been seeing Klukshu grizzly bears out later into November, even early December, feeding on coho. Some call them "ice bears" for the way their wet fur becomes encased in ice, dangling from them like chandeliers. There's even a word for "winter grizzly bear" in the Southern Tutchone language: uyekatth'u, or a bear forced out in winter.

Research is showing that the effects of a changing climate — warming temperatures, melting glaciers and shifting food availability — have the potential to amplify conflicts between humans and wildlife. What can we learn from people in Klukshu about how to live with grizzly bears?

"Even before firearms, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations people had the technologies and skills to exclude bears from the river if they had wanted to," says Douglas Clark, a human-bear conflict specialist and professor at the University of Saskatchewan. "They chose coexistence."

Hoar frost (ABOVE) covers the forest in November. Grizzlies fish at night, too, when salmon are more docile (OPPOSITE).

In the early 2000s, Clark worked as a park warden in Kluane National Park, and later, focused his PhD research on grizzly bear-human coexistence in Klukshu, asserting that Indigenous knowledge can provide guidance. He continues to partner with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations on wildlife projects today.

Clark's research in Klukshu explored the concept of "practices of respect" for living with grizzly bears: rules for living with bears passed down through generational knowledge. But the notion of "respect" is not as ubiquitous as it may seem, he cautions. "Respect is a word that people from multiple cultures use and, as non-Indigenous people, [we tend to think] we're agreeing on what it means — but we're wrong," he says.

Respect for bears through a western lens, for example, could imply *mutual avoidance*, a strategy commonly used by wildlife managers to keep people and bears separate. But in Klukshu, Clark points out, respect doesn't mean distance; instead, it refers to a dynamic relationship with bears.

"Respect is a social relationship between individual bears and individual people."

And the details, says Clark, matter profoundly.

THERE ARE RULES to living with grizzly bears in Klukshu, says Doris Allen, an Elder who has come here every summer for the past 60 years to fish. We meet in her cabin in Klukshu. Outside, a ribbon of smoke rises up out of her smokehouse, only it's not sockeye salmon that's drying: it's a moose, recently harvested by her grandsons.

Originally from the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in Old Crow, Allen first came to the summer fishing village to stay with her late husband, Grand Chief Harry Allen, and his family in the early 1960s. At that time, some people were still camping in tents.

"The Elders would talk about the bears, how they'd come and go, and warn you: 'don't be wandering around bushes by yourself,'" says Allen, who admits she broke that rule only once. She can vividly recall a day in June while fishing for king salmon — a species of salmon that weighs four to five times more than a sockeye — near the community of Dalton Post. Allen took a short cut off the trail, bushwhacking towards the river to see the salmon, when she came face to face with a grizzly bear standing on his hind legs. She froze on the spot.

"That guy was a big blonde — taller than I am," she recalls. "He looked at me and I looked at him. I couldn't move. I couldn't even yell."

Her husband and another man came up behind and the bear ran off.

"After that, I don't run to the creek by myself like that," chuckles Allen.

The Elders had other rules, too, about not saying the bear's name or speaking badly about him. They spoke about the importance of keeping the area clean of garbage because

An ice bear searches for salmon (ABOVE). In Klukshu (OPPOSITE), the right side of the river is for people, the left for bears.

"they've got a good nose; they can smell a long way.

"The Elders would always say, don't cook bacon during fall time or you're going to have somebody knocking at your door," laughs Allen. "I got a kick out of that one."

Allen and her husband built their first cabin in Klukshu nearly 50 years ago. She never remembers having a negative encounter with a grizzly bear.

"They just want fish," she says, noting how the bears feed on the salmon's head, neck and tail and leave the rest of the carcass to decay on the shore.

Sharing the Klukshu River with bears — and practising the rules of respect — could have many positive benefits for both environment *and* humans, says Clark. He points to studies in nearby coastal Alaska that have found brown bears play a key role in transferring salmon-derived nitrogen into terrestrial systems (by depositing carcasses and scat), which enriches the growth of trees and plants. While the same research has yet to be conducted in Klukshu, Clark wonders if the nutrient transfer from salmon to grizzlies to land is promoting willow growth and, in turn, improved moose habitat for hunting.

"To this day, no researcher has looked at the *human role* in bear-salmon systems," he says. But this example "allows us a much bigger, bolder way of thinking about coexistence between people and bears," says Clark. "It's more than tolerance; there can be mutual benefit."

PEOPLE IN KLUKSHU respect the wisdom of bears, says Hume. He's sitting across from me at the kitchen table in his cabin, built only metres away from the river — so close that he and Barb can sometimes hear the salmon splashing upstream at night.

"He was a kind of teacher to our people," he says, noting how they'd observe the different plants that the grizzly bear fed on during spring, after months of hibernating and fasting in the den, to stimulate their digestive systems.

"Our people used to have a diet of straight meat, straight salmon — so in the spring, you had to cleanse your system," says Hume.

There were protocols for moving through the bush: the bears sense if you have fear or you're talking about them, which could imply human superiority over bears. If there's a big scat on the trail, "you walk around — you don't step over," says Hume.

Hume talks to the bears and asks them to stay on "their side" of the river. Sometimes he relies on the use of non-lethal deterrents, including rubber bullets, to dissuade the bears from crossing over. Occasionally, he recalls, when the sockeye salmon ran abundantly, bears that edged too close to the fishing traps would be shot. People built wooden stands along the river to target bears deemed too aggressive. But even when bears were killed, specific rules were followed to honour and respect their lives, including opening the stomach and pulling the intestines north, or placing the skull in a tree or other high place.

Some of the grizzlies, however — often older, more dominant bears — would learn to coexist along the Klukshu River, fishing along the opposite bank and keeping their distance from people. These are the bears people *wanted* around, says Hume.

"We used them as protection," he says. "The big grizzly bear wards off the younger ones, so we're always respectful of the older ones. He kind of looks after the village and looks after the people."

Clark refers to the concept of the "good bear" in his research, citing a longstanding, sophisticated practice of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations to observe and take advantage of the natural dominance hierarchy that develops when grizzly bears come together.

"Those big males tend to be very smart and confident," says Clark. "By tolerating a big male bear staying around the village, and giving it

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THIS PAGE: A scattering of coho salmon eggs is a meal for an American dipper. OPPOSITE: Coho and sockeye salmon at their spawning grounds at Klukshu Lake.

the space and time to fish, those potentially troublemaking younger bears tend to stay away."

The bear known as the Mayor was one of those. Over the years, Hume developed a special bond with him.

"When I left [Klukshu] in the late fall, he'd still be fishing on coho in the water. He'd come and lay on the porch of my old house," says Hume, gesturing to the cabin next door.

Essential to these kinds of relationships, says Clark, is that people practise the rules of living with bears consistently. The bears, in turn, observe predictable and non-threatening human patterns they can respond to.

"The bears figure this out and as long as the people there learn the rules and follow them — which they have done for millennia and still do — it can all work," Clark says.

For nearly a decade, the Mayor fished along the banks of the Klukshu River, keeping younger bears — those more likely to take risks to obtain food — at bay.

Then, on November 15, 2023, wildlife photographer Peter Mather was driving along the highway, checking his remote camera traps along the river, when he noticed a number of ravens circling. On the side of the highway, Mather discovered a bear carcass in the snow. The animal's head, hide and paws were missing, a sign of a trophy hunt (legal in the Yukon, provided the hunter has a valid licence and permit).

Days later, Mather received a screenshot from an acquaintance. The hunter had posted a photograph of the dead bear on his Facebook page. Mather showed the image to Hume,

A grizzly bear nabs a chum salmon on the nearby Kluane River.

who immediately identified the bear as the Mayor. The bear hadn't been seen in recent months. Hume suspects a long-legged black grizzly bear may have pushed him out of Klukshu.

"His time was coming," Hume says with somber resignation in his voice.

Community members in Klukshu have been grieving the loss of the enigmatic bear.

"It's really sad," agrees Allen. "He was a good bear. We'd see him every year. Somebody shot him just for parts. They left the carcass. It was bad."

Following the bear's death, Yukon Conservation Officer Services charged the hunter with two violations of the Wildlife Act, including hunting a grizzly in an area where he was not permitted to and careless use of a firearm. But months later, in court, all charges were dropped because a conservation officer had originally told the hunter that the kill was legal.

Hume is advocating for a three-kilometre corridor around Klukshu to be off-limits for hunting.

AT THE END OF SEPTEMBER, 10,343 sockeye salmon were counted through the Klukshu River, a far cry from the preseason forecast of 31,400 and below the 10-year average of 13,700 salmon, says Wallace.

RESPECT IS A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL **BEARS** AND INDIVIDUAL **PEOPLE.**

Meanwhile, in Klukshu, the memory of abundant sockeye runs — of the rivers overflowing with salmon — is still alive with Elders like Hume and Allen. Today, their former spawning areas at the outlet of Klukshu Lake have become crowded with weeds, says Hume. "There's no room for them to spawn."

There's uncertainty around how Klukshu will adapt to future ecological changes and what the loss of the Mayor will ultimately mean for the community. What remains the same, however, is people's respect for the bears. Allen doesn't bother to board up her windows or otherwise bear-proof her cabin. The squirrels, she says, are more bothersome than the bears. She heeds the advice of Elders who told her that, come mid-October, everyone should leave Klukshu so the bears can feed on the spawning coho. When the snow falls in November, the grizzlies wander down to the banks of the Klukshu River, now void of people.

"It's their territory, too," says Allen.

Watch *Kings of the North*, Peter Mather's short film about the Klukshu ice bears, at cangeo.ca/icebears