



Bear Smart Community Initiatives Frequently Asked Questions

1. Bear Smart Community Overview

What is a Bear Smart Community?

A Bear Smart Community is a community-led and community-wide effort to prevent human-bear conflicts. Members of Bear Smart Communities look to address the root sources of human-bear conflicts in their area and take actions like removing or securing bear attractants (like garbage, livestock, fruit trees, and bird feeders) and educating residents on how to be safe when recreating or working (like carrying bear spray and being aware of surroundings). As a result, people and their property in these communities stay safe and bears keep moving across the landscape.

What is a “community”?

A community is any centralized locale, like a city, small town, neighborhood network or HOA, or resort property. It includes all the residential properties, businesses, and public spaces in an area.

When it comes to being a Bear Smart Community, the “community” needs to be physically connected on the landscape. That’s important because a bear might explore multiple properties looking for food. If it finds food at one house, it’s going to be encouraged to explore the neighboring properties, too, to see what else it can find. But if all the properties in an area work together to get rid of bear attractants, a bear will quickly realize that it’s not going to get food anywhere in the community and move on.

Is there an “official” Bear Smart Community program?

The idea for Bear Smart Communities is based off a successful Canadian program that is supported by the government. The United States does not currently have an official government agency program, but the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) has endorsed the idea of Bear Smart Communities and shares a framework and manual on its website that provides basic information about how to develop them.

Why should my community want to be Bear Smart?

Communities that work to reduce and prevent human-bear conflicts increase human safety, reduce property damage caused by bears, and reduce the number of bears that need to be lethally removed from their habitat. Working to become Bear Smart allows communities to hold engaging events, strengthen community ties and bonds by bringing residents and businesses together for a common cause, and welcome tourists and visitors with confidence.

What are the challenges in working to become Bear Smart?

Every community is different in how it develops a Bear Smart program. Becoming and being Bear Smart is often a long-term process depending on the goals determined and defined by the community. For example, if conflict prevention is intended to be community-wide, including businesses and local officials, it may take several years to reach the goal of being Bear Smart. Some community leaders and groups find it difficult at first to get engagement from others and form a diverse group of interested stakeholders. Others are challenged to raise funds for projects. Encountering complications along the way is normal, and they can be worked through with the right approach and, if needed, assistance.

I've heard about "Bear Aware" and "BearWise" work. How do these relate to or differ from Bear Smart efforts?

All of these initiatives are about learning to live with bears and bear conservation. Different organizations at times have used these labels to encourage people to coexist with bears, emphasizing different approaches, while sticking to several common themes. For example, the BearWise program includes a network of agencies and organizations and focuses on living with black bears across the U.S. Be Bear Aware is an organization in Montana, but the phrase is used as a common term today by many organizations, agencies, and people to encourage people to practice awareness and bear-safe behaviors. Bear Smart initiatives are community-level programs to coexist with bears and, thus far, have primarily been developed in Canada and the U.S. Rocky Mountain West.

2. Becoming a Bear Smart Community

How does a community become Bear Smart?

There are three main themes that communities address to become Bear Smart:

- Educating community members about the various attractants that draw bears in, and how to reduce these risks on their properties and in the community,
- Managing waste, which is often the biggest bear attractant in communities, and
- Managing all other attractants, which takes ongoing effort by community members.

Addressing these components looks different for every community, but often follows a path of gathering information and establishing a committee or working group, completing a community assessment, developing a community plan, and implementing and maintaining the plan. Sometimes, groups or communities begin their initiatives with a few bear conflict prevention projects, which can create momentum and gain additional support.

Who should be involved in the process of becoming Bear Smart?

A diverse group that represents your community should ideally be involved in Bear Smart initiatives. This will ensure that in addressing human-bear conflicts, you are considering residents' concerns and proposing realistic solutions for each part of your community.

That said, some community leaders have mobilized efforts with like-minded stakeholders to begin education and/or demonstration projects before forming a diverse working group or getting local officials involved. Ultimately, for people to adopt conflict prevention actions, they likely need engagement in the initiative, and for it to succeed long-term, the local government (e.g., city council) or other decision-makers may need to be involved. Depending on your community, local government may be involved at the start or later on in the process.

If you form a Bear Smart group or committee to address human-bear conflicts, the IGBC suggests including representatives from the following groups:

- Local governments
- Tribal governments
- State fish and game agency members
- Solid waste managers
- Non-governmental organizations
- Representative community members (e.g., landowners, farmers, ranchers, etc.)
- Educators
- Other community interest groups (e.g., local clubs)
- Local tourism representatives
- Federal land management agencies
- State land management agencies

While talking with all or most of these stakeholders to gather information and get initial thoughts on community-wide bear conflict prevention is important, it may be difficult to put a group together in the beginning that has all these members. Some community leaders form groups over time.

What is a community assessment (also known as a conflict, risk, or hazard assessment), and how can my community conduct one?

A community assessment builds understanding of the current or potential human-bear conflicts and their causes within a community. Conducting a community assessment is key for creating a successful management plan, as it will guide a community in finding solutions and tactics that make sense for them based on available resources, types of conflicts, public perceptions toward bears, and other factors.

Assessments will look different and vary in length for each community but should include a description of the community (economy types, population, development trends, etc.), information about bear populations and movement, attractants throughout the defined area, and ongoing or past efforts to reduce conflicts, among other components. This information can be found online, through local government records, through local wildlife managers, and by talking with residents. Find the full list of what to include in a comprehensive community assessment in the IGBC Bear Smart Community manual.

At what point does a community call themselves “Bear Smart”?

At this point in time, there is no official recognition or certification program within the U.S. for communities that are working to become Bear Smart. Deciding when a community has reached this

marker is up to each community. As a part of their conflict management plan, a community may choose to set goals that indicate when it has become “Bear Smart” (e.g., conflicts reduced by a certain amount, attractants secured at a certain level, participation by a certain number of community members, or simply going through each noted step of the process with defined outcomes). Other communities may pursue the process but not be concerned with the Bear Smart label.

3. Resources

What does it cost to make a community Bear Smart?

The total financial cost of becoming Bear Smart varies widely from community to community. The cost depends on many factors including the size of your community and the number and type of unsecured attractants. Often, one of the biggest costs for communities is securing garbage, as it requires obtaining residential bear-resistant cans, securing waste at businesses, and securing local dump sites.

It’s also important to account for ongoing or future costs associated with reducing human-bear conflicts (e.g., replacing residential bear-resistant cans as they wear out, continuing outreach efforts, responding to new attractants or bear presence, etc.).

Is there funding and support available for communities looking to become Bear Smart?

People and Carnivores offers support for community-wide conflict reduction efforts through its Bear Smart Community Resource Program. This support includes consultation with our experienced staff, providing educational materials, and, sometimes, funding.

There are also other funding sources that provide grants for bear conservation or bear conflict prevention work, such as foundations, NGOs, or businesses.

Does my community working group need to be a nonprofit to receive project funding?

It depends on the organizations you apply to for funding. When applying to grants, check individual requirements to see who is eligible to receive funds. Many funders require groups, individuals, or businesses that don’t have 501(c)(3) status to have a fiscal sponsor in order to receive funding. A fiscal sponsor can receive and administer financial contributions for your group.

Where can I find examples of other Bear Smart Communities, assessments, management plans, etc.?

The Get Bear Smart website includes a list of communities that are Bear Smart, currently with an emphasis on Canadian communities. The IGBC offers a reference guide that includes lists of assessments, plans, and enforcement models from various communities.

Where can I find educational materials to help with outreach about my community’s Bear Smart efforts?

People and Carnivores can provide groups with educational materials, and example materials can be found on our website. Other educational materials and information about reducing human-bear conflicts can be found through these websites:

- Get Bear Smart
- BearWise
- State wildlife management agencies
- IGBC
- National Park Service and individual national park pages

If you need a specific material that you can't find elsewhere, contact P&C, or consider applying to our Bear Smart Community Resource Program to receive support.

4. Attractants

What are attractants?

Attractants are things that draw bears to them, such as human foods, garbage, animals and livestock, gardens, orchards, bee boxes, bird seed and feeders, and many other things. Attractants are anything with an odor. Bears have a very keen sense of smell and consider anything with an odor a potential food source.

Few of us can eliminate every attractant at our home or workplace, but we can eliminate some (e.g., birdfeeders from March through November) and we can secure others so that bears cannot access them (e.g., garbage, coolers, pet food).

How do I know what bear attractants are in my community?

Local wildlife managers (like those that work with state agencies) can be a great source of information on what attractants exist in your community and where conflicts are most prevalent because of these attractants. You can also informally gather information; consider walking around town and making note of unsecured attractants you see and their general location, and talk to others about what they see.

Whatever method you use to learn about attractants, be sure to catalogue them by conducting a community assessment, which will be key for creating a conflict management plan. Find details on how to conduct an assessment in the IGBC Bear Smart Community manual.

Where can I find information about managing bear attractants?

People and Carnivores offers multiple resources across our website about managing attractants (including on our Research and Manuals page and our Bear Smart Initiatives page). If you'd like more information about community-wide, large-scale efforts, contact us.

The Get Bear Smart website is another good resource. The IGBC's Bear Smart Community references guide links to multiple resources on managing attractants, including information on garbage, fruit trees, and livestock.

Can my community require people to secure attractants?

Some communities choose to pass ordinances, bylaws, or other local regulations to ensure people are properly securing bear attractants. Ideally, there should be some enforcement mechanism in place to ensure people comply with these regulations. To encourage people to voluntarily comply with any regulations, it's important to gain community support for reducing human-bear conflicts and build understanding of why securing attractants is necessary alongside any regulations.

Find examples of community ordinances and regulations in the IGBC Bear Smart Community references guide.

5. General

I think my community needs to address its bear conflicts. What should I do?

Individual actions can inspire others; make changes in your own backyard and start conversation with your neighbors about them. Start talking with other community members and local officials to learn about bear-related issues and people's interest in addressing them.

Consider if a Bear Smart Community initiative is right for your community. If it is, consider forming a diverse working group to start a Bear Smart initiative. That said, addressing bear conflicts in your community doesn't necessarily require a Bear Smart initiative.

What if others in my community don't want to participate in a Bear Smart Community initiative but it's important to me/a small group?

Bear Smart Community initiatives aren't right for every community, sometimes because of a lack of resources, support, or interest. That doesn't mean you can't keep working to address human-bear conflicts. Any effort by a landowner or business to keep bears from being drawn to their property and reduce conflicts is a good one. Consider starting with a single project or addressing a single attractant without adding the "Bear Smart" label to the action (e.g., replace garbage cans in public parks with bear-resistant ones, host a gleaning event in late summer or fall, provide or connect people with resources to install electric fence around chicken coops in conflict hot spots).

Over time, community attitudes may change (especially if people have seen how successful your projects have been) and larger-scale, community-wide efforts may become more feasible.

What if we only see black bears?

No matter the species of bear, your community can participate in Bear Smart initiatives. Whether your area has grizzly bears, black bears, or both, it's still important to secure attractants and provide education and outreach on living with bears to prevent human-bear conflict. By conducting a community assessment, you can take into account the types of bears in your area (or what species may be in your area in the future), and the most appropriate ways to reduce conflicts.

If your community exclusively has black bears, take a look at BearWise's resources on reducing human-bear conflicts. Resources from People and Carnivores, Get Bear Smart, and the IGBC address both grizzly and black bears. Remember that you may only see black bears now, but this may change, as grizzlies are expanding their range.

Resources:

People and Carnivores: <https://peopleandcarnivores.org/bearsmart>

IGBC Bear Smart Communities manual and reference guide: <https://igbconline.org/programs/bear-smart-communities>

Get Bear Smart: <https://www.bearsmart.com>

BearWise: <https://bearwise.org>