



Bear necessities

Ursine star tracked by trail cameras

What, besides the obvious, does a bear do in the woods? If you've ever pondered that question, go online to Bear71.nfb.ca to find the answer.

It will take you to a 20-minute-long interactive documentary featured on the National Film Board of Canada's website. It's about the wildlife in Banff National Park, which is in the Canadian Rockies. Unlike "March of the Penguins," which was narrated by Oscar-winner Morgan Freeman, this is narrated by Bear 71. Actually, it's the voice of a woman named Mia Kirshner telling the story from the bear's point of view. More accurately, it's the bear's point of view as imagined by people who seem to believe a grizzly bear has in-depth knowledge of science, history and human nature.

Smarter than the average bear

The creators of the site decided to give Bear 71 this knowledge, and a human personality, as a plot device to help viewers connect with the struggles faced by wildlife. As humans encroach further into the back country, conflicts with wild animals become more common. The end result of these interactions rarely favors the animals.

The site uses an engaging combination of video, animation, narration, music and interactivity to create a strangely soothing journey through the virtual mountains of the remote Canadian wilderness.

It opens with a sentence on the screen: "There aren't a lot of ways for a grizzly bear to die." That's followed by a stylish title animation that morphs a virtual landscape into the words "Bear 71." The screen then fills with a video of our star being captured, tagged and released. Scenes of the bear thrashing about in vain trying to escape from a steel-cable snare, charging the bars of her transport cage and then barreling away from a barrage of firecrackers when released give you an immediate sense of the animal's raw power, speed and ferocity. This is in stark contrast to the bear's sensitive voice that ranges from serene to playful to somber.

Into the wild

Bear 71 is then relentlessly tracked via radio collar and trail cameras as she does the things a bear does in the woods. When she encounters a trail camera you can click on her icon to view the video. Her travels are traced over eight years across a semi-abstract, undulating animation of the park's topography. As you follow, she tells you her story.

Along the way you will encounter other residents of the park, both four-legged and two-legged. Clicking on the labeled symbols for moose, cougars, coyotes, bobcats and other indigenous creatures that wander across your screen will open windows featuring trail camera videos of the animals in action. Hovering your cursor over the video displays facts about the animals featured.

Videos from the trails will take over the screen at several points during the journey. One video portrays the potential for deadly con-

flict from the vantage point of a camera that records the comings and goings along a wildlife corridor that passes under a road. It begins with a massive grizzly bear lumbering up the trail toward the camera. In the next scene a group of teenagers in swim suits carrying inflatable pool toys passes leisurely from the opposite direction. The bear then reappears, trotting in the same direction as the kids were headed. Finally, a lone moose treads cautiously toward the underpass. There's no way of knowing from the video how close in time the various actors passed in front of the camera. But those vulnerable kids, with a teenager's air of invincibility, are sharing the trail to the waterhole with an 800-pound apex predator armed with bone-crushing teeth and 4-inch claws.

Surveillance

Fans of nature, as well as fans of design, will enjoy watching Bear 71. Seeing the animals, and some people, carry on with their daily routines while unaware they're being watched provides a kind of voyeuristic pleasure.

And the animation of the park, combined with the soundtrack, is mesmerizing. It's a collection of simple shapes that move across the contours of the land. They're colored to indicate land and water, and scaled to separate forest from field. Little black squares zoom across the roads. Kids will enjoy it, too, but be warned, it doesn't have a happy ending.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites