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At War With Poaching in Protected Areas

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Fifteen years ago this May, naturalist Charlie Russell and artist Maureen Enns took a hired truck to a zoo 30 kilometers outside Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to adopt three bear cubs. They would raise the orphaned cubs in a project that gained international attention—but that resulted in an act of violence that illustrated the harsh reality of conservation efforts on the peninsula.

That spring day in 1997, the zookeeper was waiting for Russell and Enns' arrival. He led the couple to a cage holding three bear siblings that had been brought to the zoo the previous month. As Russell and Enns later described in their bestselling book *Grizzly Heart*, the zookeeper "threw back the door of the cubs' cage, reached in, and expertly removed each bear by the scruff of her neck." Just a few minutes later, they wrote, they were driving away "with a box full of squalling bears" in the flat bed of the truck.

These noisy 15-pound cubs were the first three bears that Russell and Enns eventually raised to maturation. That summer, the cubs were taken from the zoo to the South Kamchatka Sanctuary without permission from the sanctuary administrators. The animals were smuggled into the territory by helicopter. Local scientists, naturalists, and reserve rangers

worried that brown bears are inherently aggressive; they feared that raising orphan cubs in the area would result in the animals' death at the least, and they warned Russell and Enns that their own lives could be at stake. Still, the two Canadians were determined to prove that bears and humans could peacefully coexist. Their previous summer living in an isolated cabin in the sanctuary had led them to believe that a project reintroducing cubs to the Kamchatkan wilderness would be essential to understanding bear-human interaction.

The project that began that May spanned another decade. As the cubs matured, they learned to explore, fish, and eventually fend for themselves. Their story created so much tension and wonder that they became the subjects of at least two documentaries and three books. Reserve administrators eventually warmed to the project, and people around the world watched each year as the bears maintained their love for their surrogate human parents. The greatest drama in the bears' story, however, came when no one was looking.

In 2003, Russell and Enns returned to their cabin to find a bear gall bladder nailed to the wall. More than 40 area bears, including the one cub they'd raised who had remained in the area, were gone—killed by poachers. The massacre's message was clear. Russell and Enns had spent years monitoring the territory, reporting poaching activities to authorities, and advocating for wildlife protection. The gall bladder hung as a bloody rebuke to all their work. In 2005, Russell returned to the South Kamchatka Sanctuary to raise two more orphan cubs, but after that his cabin was shuttered.

Poaching remains alive and well on Kamchatka. While anti-poaching patrols try to outmaneuver those who would kill animals in protected areas here, it's nearly impossible to cover so much ground. Poachers seek not only bears but also sable, lynx, and bighorn sheep. Salmon are especially coveted: regional officials have estimated that 10% of the salmon caught on Kamchatka is poached, while others say that more like half of the annual catch is illegal. Fish are slashed open for their caviar. Bear carcasses have their paws and gall bladders harvested. Conservation stories like that of the bear cubs are inspiring but rare, while utilization and exploitation of Kamchatka's natural resources remain sadly commonplace.

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