



# Sharing the World With Bears: Conflict and Coexistence in the Siberian Taiga

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## Abstract

Conservation regimes and governmental relations with Indigenous peoples both vary widely. Successfully resolving conflicts arising from human-wildlife interactions (HWI) is complicated by the existence of multiple ontologies not only among various publics but within historically-marginalized and fragmented Indigenous communities. Current models of HWI are being reevaluated in order to better understand how humans and animals, including large carnivores, have learned to coexist. This article uses field interviews and Indigenous songs texts to describe the uniquely moral character of human-bear interactions among the elder generation of Siberian Khanty of Siberia. We outline the potential of such an ethos for developing more inclusive and just management policies and practices focused on tolerance and coexistence, while also identifying some limitations on developing such policies that emerge from acculturative stresses.

**Keywords** Bears · Coexistence · Human-wildlife interaction · Indigenous populations · Khanty · Russia

## Introduction

In May 2017 four Siberian Indigenous Khanty hunters in Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug-Yugra, Russia (KhMAO), were charged with illegally killing three brown bears. Their rifles and snowmobiles were confiscated, and they faced a potential fine of 270,000 rubles, or roughly \$4,000 USD. More than five years later, the case against them still has not been resolved. Justice delayed is certainly justice denied, but a more general interest in this case concerns the circumstances surrounding the hunt, the offense charged, and the implications of both for conservation policies and practices.

According to one of the Khanty hunters charged, he and his young nephew had gone out that day in March 2017 to check on their reindeer, when the youth, having raced ahead of him, came upon a bear's den which his grandfather had discovered the previous autumn. The teenager poked a stick

into the den, whereupon the bear charged out, attacked the boy, and ran away. The uncle hurried to the injured youth and rushed him to the village hospital. Then the uncle with three other relatives set out after the bear. They found it, killed it, and brought back to their camp where they prayed over it with customary respect. When it was being skinned, they discovered that it was a nursing she-bear. The next day the men began to search for the orphaned cubs when they were surprised by two, two-year-old bears, one taller than a man, who attacked them. They killed them both. Returning to camp and butchering those bears, they found in the stomach of one of the yearlings the remains of the newborn cub the she-bear had been nursing. Police investigating the hospital report visited the four Khanty and, after finding only the bearskins and hearing the men's claim that they had divided the meat among themselves, suspected the men of poaching with the intent to sell and charged them with killing the bears without a license.<sup>1</sup>

Many Indigenous communities can offer some version of this event: a resource manager, federal or state official, sometimes even a private person, insists on the necessity of taking

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<sup>1</sup> This story was first told to us by Agrafena Pesikova Sopochnina, who served as a translator at the preliminary hearing and also a member of our NSF research team. It was reported in local news outlets, including (God, 2018; Sud, 2018; Pozor, 2018; Chleny, 2019; V Surgutskom raione, 2019).

some action that is justified by law and perhaps rationalized by science but nevertheless in conflict with Indigenous values and experience (Povinelli, 1995, Van Daele et al., 2001). And while conservation policies may or may not directly address native perspectives, may, in fact, be fronted at the agency by a native person, neither the integration of TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) nor the development of co-management mechanisms guarantees a solution that build trust (Berkes, 2012; Nadasdy, 1999, 2004; Natcher et al., 2005).

Reflecting on such dissatisfactions has provoked a reevaluation of human-wildlife interactions aimed at better understanding how humans and animals, even large carnivores such as bears, can learn to coexist (Frank & Glikman, 2019; Nyhus, 2016; Pooley et al., 2017, 2022). Neil Carter and John Linnell define coexistence as “a dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and large carnivores co-adapt to living in shared landscapes where human interactions with carnivores are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term carnivore population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk” (2016: 575). When thinking of conservation in terms of co-existence or co-adaptation, the experience of Indigenous peoples has proved valuable (Clark & Slocombe, 2009; Reo & Whyte, 2012; Isabella, 2018; Artelle et al., 2021). For more than a decade, we have been working to understand the place of bears and bear ceremonialism among the Indigenous Khanty and Mansi peoples of western Siberia. As a result, we have begun to understand something of the complexity involved in trying to effectively integrate Indigenous understandings of bears with Western “scientific” conservation discourse. In the Siberian taiga, Khanty and bears share an intensely social relationship that is also a moral one, bound by code and custom, which governs their interaction. Exploring the eastern Khanty experience may help us to reimagine human-bear interactions as coexistence and offer suggestions for more just, inclusive and sustainable management strategies.

## Factions in the Forest

Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug-Yugra (KhMAO) is a legally-defined subdivision of the Russian Federation with a land area only slightly smaller than France. This huge region is almost entirely characterized by a complex of forest, muskeg swamp and riverine ecosystems known as the Middle West Siberian taiga, which is defined by the basins of the Ob’ and Irtysh Rivers that together comprise the world’s third largest river system in terms of volume of water.

Historically, the west Siberian taiga has been home to Ob’-Ugrian communities of Khanty and Mansi since before the current era. Most of the Indigenous Khanty and Mansi population live in remote, widely scattered extended family

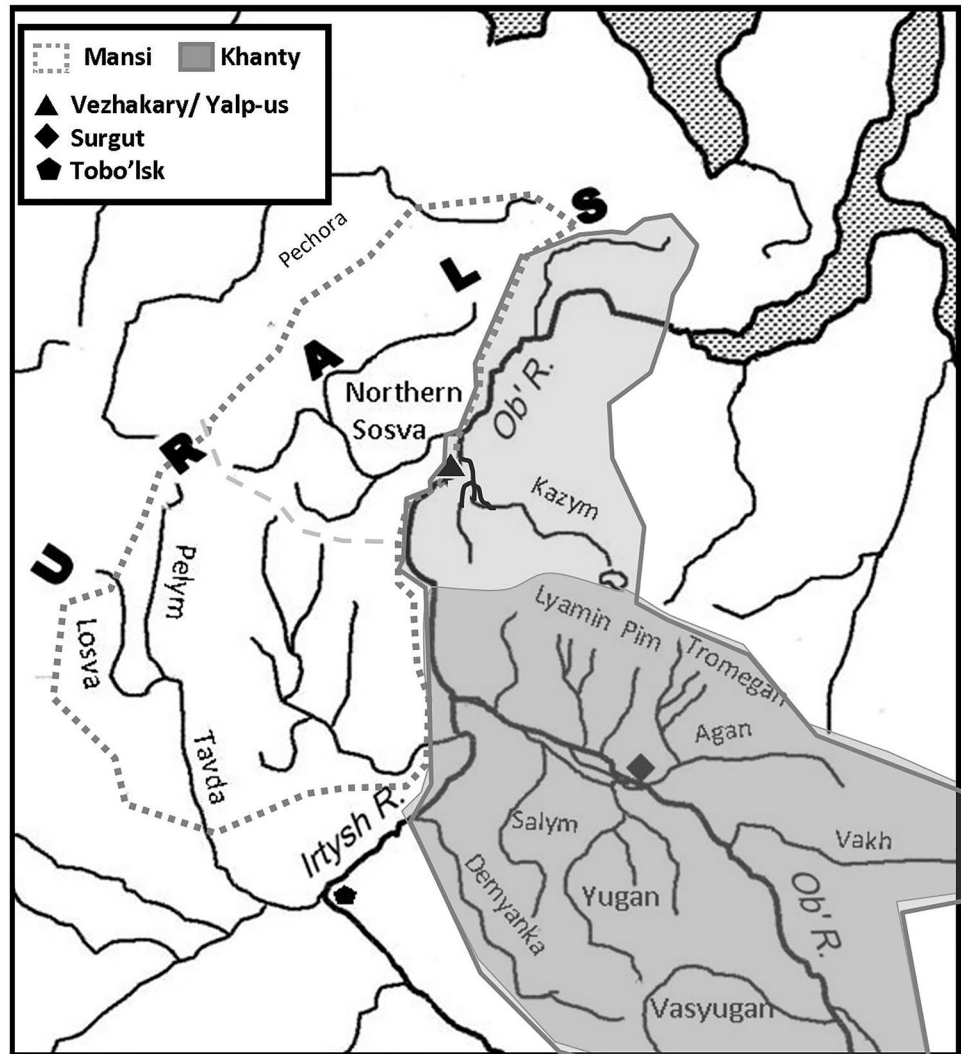
settlements with subsistence economies, which many complement with small-scale forest reindeer herding. The four accused Khanty mentioned earlier are such *forest reindeer herders* from the upper Pim River (Fig. 1).

Despite Christianizing efforts and Soviet repression, Khanty traditional religion still has many adherents. Khanty believe that their traditional family hunting territories are protected by family gods, offspring of the lineage-founding deities, who are descendants of the high god, Torum. Khanty thus believe that sacred power has been historically invested in both the landscape and the lineage. And if fifty years ago the eastern Khanty, like many Canadian First Nations, were encouraged to support themselves economically by trapping and hunting, today many derive much, if not most of their income from compensation agreements made with oil companies. Most Khanty and Mansi are fluently bilingual, but prefer to speak their Indigenous language. Those under 40 have been exposed to intensive boarding school education and the influence of Russian popular culture. And unlike Indigenous peoples in North America, they have no state-recognized Indigenous self-governing entity that might serve as a legitimate community voice (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011).

Beginning in the late 1960s Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug-Yugra was transformed by the discovery of oil. Today the region is responsible for the production of most of Russia’s oil and much of its natural gas. Expansion of infrastructure and in-migration of temporary workers has diminished Khanty numbers and reduced the territory they can exploit for subsistence or displaced them entirely. Since the rush for black gold began, the human population of Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug-Yugra has increased significantly—by almost ten percent just in the last decade—and now stands at about 1.7 million. Less than 2% of the population is Indigenous Khanty. About 75% of its 1.7 million population, almost all non-native, live in the ten biggest cities and towns. The remaining, mostly non-Indigenous population is scattered among very small local service center villages.

The growth of the oil and gas industry has transformed the area occupied by Eurasian brown bears, the only species of bear in the region. Stressed by the loss of habitat from the rapid expansion of human settlement and oil and gas exploitation, bears regularly intrude upon remote settlements in KhMAO. Spring reindeer calving and late summer-autumn berrying, fish camps, and the gathering of nuts from the cones of the Siberian stone pine, are important occasions for the Khanty when bear-human interactions are likely. Bears also enter remote oil and gas facilities, Khanty family settlements and even much larger, predominantly-Russian villages, in search of food. Especially dangerous are bears (locally called *shatun*) who den up late or do not hibernate well or long because they poorly prepared for hibernation, because they emerge from their dens hungry.

**Fig. 1** Historical territories of current Ob-Ugrian river residence groups (Map by Andrew Wiget)



Bears figure in the public calculus when they destroy property, disrupt human economic activity, or much more rarely, attack people (Puchkovsky, 2021). Although Khanty have subsistence hunting rights on their traditional territory, the regulatory regime of the Russian Federation heavily burdens them by requiring expensive and difficult to procure individual species licenses for non-food hunting and trapping. Statistics suggest hunting regulation has had little impact on species conservation at least in western Siberia. Vaisfeld et al. report that the Russian brown bear population is very large, estimated in 2013 at 214,000 (2014: 41), has been growing steadily (but see Puchkovsky, 2021: 15–19) and argue that the “Legal harvest of brown bear is a little over 2.5% of its population number and is considered to be insufficient. It is believed that this level of harvest of the predator could be raised up to 15% without fear of damage to the population”. In KhMAO, official estimates of the bear population have steadily remained above 6000 in the past decade and in 2020 rose to 7,400. Only 210 bears

were reported killed in 2016 (V KHMAO medvedi, 2021; Doklad, 2020:83, 84). And one might argue that, if anything, illiberal hunting regulations have increased the number of brown bears which, in the face of habitat loss due to expanding human occupation, has produced a greater likelihood of human-bear confrontations.

As Kudrenko et al. report, generally “Both the brown bear population size and the number of casualties have been growing in Russia” (2020:2). In 2020 alone, 138 calls for assistance were made in KhMAO about potentially dangerous bears, up from 50 to 60 a few years earlier (Medved yugorchaninu, 2020; V KHMAO medvedi, 2021). The current policy is that bears which are threatening and dangerous should be reported to the KhMAO Department of Natural Resources, which “will make a decision within three working days to determine whose hunting grounds the bear has entered. If they are assigned, then the activities are carried out by the hunting user [so, for example, a Khanty on his own family territory [*semeinoe rodovoe ugod'e*]]—Authors.

If the lands are publicly available, then the department works there” (*Medved yugorchaninu*, 2020). But such a formal intervention is often neither timely nor effective. In 1995 we asked a Khanty reindeer herder about the remains of a reindeer we saw at his place, which was not far from the location of the May 2017 encounter mentioned at the opening of this article. He told us that one morning about a month earlier a bear had broken into his corral and killed seven or eight reindeer, savaging them brutally but not eating them. They called the special animal control, which mounted a helicopter and ground hunt, but failed to locate the bear. On another occasion, the wife of the hunter principally accused in the 2017 incident, testified that at the beginning of summer three years earlier she had herself seen a bear come within three meters of a 12-year-old boy, seize a reindeer calf, consume its insides and immediately began looking for its next victim (God, 2018).

Turning from human-bear interactions in the economic sphere to the place of bears in local cultural identity, two things are clear. The first is that in KhMAO, bears are not treated by government agencies as if they provide significant ecosystem cultural services, that is, the kinds of “spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and inspirational wellbeing that people derive from the ‘natural’ world around them.” (Barbier et al., 2009:248) They certainly are not the object of tourist visits. Bears are simply one of the species designated for management oversight. The second is how boldly this evaluation of bears contrasts with the enormous cultural value of bears among the Indigenous Khanty and Mansi.

The especially prominent role of the bear in Khanty and Mansi cultures has long been recognized by both Russian and other non-Indigenous observers. A special object of attention has been the elaborate customs associated with bear hunting and bear ceremonialism, a reflection of one of humankind’s oldest cultic behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Typically the bear ceremony is a three or four day performative event that combines mythological and personal songs, dances, folk drama, divination and feasting in ways that link the bear to fertility in both the forest and the home and that invoke Bear’s traditional role as arbiter of normative behaviour. Though less frequently performed today for lack of knowledgeable singers, the bear ceremony is maintained to the present day among both Khanty and Mansi as an occasion for veneration, education, entertainment, and community formation,

<sup>2</sup> Descriptions and video presentations of Khanty and Mansi bear festivals are publically accessible at the authors’ NSF project website, *Waking the Bear*, online at: <https://eloka-arctic.org/bears/>. Early researchers included Russians G. I. Novitskii, S.K. Patkanov and N. L. Gondatti; Finns, M.A. Castrén, A. Ahlqvist, A.Kannisto, U. T. Sirelius and K. F. Karjalainen; and Hungarians, J.Pápay and B. Munkácsi.

albeit in different forms among different regional groups.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly discussions of west Siberian bear ceremonialism have opened the way to a better understanding of the role of the bear in the worldviews of the Khanty, and exploring its symbolic function in social organization and intergroup relations (Schmidt, 1989).

As a feature of Khanty culture, bears certainly seem to fit Garibaldi and Turner’s definition of Cultural Keystone Species (CKS) as those “culturally salient species that shape in a major way the cultural identity of a people, as reflected in the fundamental roles these species have in diet, materials, medicine, and/or spiritual practices” (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004; see also Cristancho & Vining, 2004), and thus should be accounted for in conservation planning and as a useful indicator of social-ecological systems (Berkes et al., 2003). Although the “multiple use” criterion of CKS tends to favor consumptive over non-consumptive uses (Clark et al., 2021), among the Khanty and Mansi, Bears would seem to satisfy all the criteria outlined for evaluating the significance of a species as a CKS.

Government support in KhMAO for the maintenance, revival and public display of bear ceremonial traditions, whole or in part, at festivals and as televised performances, signals the priority attached to the Bear as a symbol of cultural identity. Thus the public picture is very much polarized: “cultural” bears are good because they are symbolic, and because they are symbolic, they—and to some degree, the Khanty and Mansi—don’t much really matter. Real bears, physical bears, however, are bad, and they matter a great deal because they are inherently dangerous, destructive and disrupt human economic activities. In short, as Povinelli observed, “reconciliation with multiculturalism ends where a conceptual accommodation to a multi-economism would begin” (1995: 506).

## Bear and Khanty

Khanty bear discourse is of two kinds. On the one hand, there are mythic songs from the bear ceremony, *pupi aryg*, which represent a shared intergenerational community heritage. On the other hand, are *iasyng*, a genre of narratives which includes not just the narrator’s personal experiences but experiences reported to the narrator which are believed to have actually happened and thus may also be transmitted intergenerationally. Both mythic bear songs

<sup>3</sup> The literature on bear ceremonialism is multilingual and too extensive to list here; it really begins with Hallowell (1926). Bibliographies can be found in the surveys of Black (1998) and Sokolova (2000) who focus on Eurasian traditions, Shepard and Sanders (1985) and Rockwell (1993) who focus on North America.



and eastern Khanty *iasyng* depict the bear as different from all other animals. As ES, an eastern Khanty from the B. Iugan River and by descent a member of the Bear clan [Kh., *pupi sir*], told us:

The bear is not like any other animal. His bones are somewhere between those of a man and an animal. And that's why he understands everything, that's how he differs from other animals, and that's why it's called "Younger Brother" or "Younger Sister." Persons from other clans would say, My Aunt, My Uncle, because the Younger Brother could be on the Mother's side, if Mother is from Bear Clan (K., *pupi sir*), then bear would be the Uncle... Even if neither parent is *pupi sir*, they would say, Aunt or Uncle, because even distant relatives might establish this relationship.

Khanty *iasyng* we have gathered indicate that, like many northern Indigenous peoples, most Khanty over age 40 acknowledge that the bear understands human language, but the bear is unique among animals (*woyuk*) in this regard. Moreover, the Bear is set apart from both humans and other animals because he can also understand unspoken human thoughts, even from afar.

Among the Mansi and Khanty, as among many circumpolar Indigenous peoples, the bear's unique position is accounted for in part by the story of a bear mother who gives birth to twins, a female human child and a male bear child (Barbeau, 1946). The text of a Khanty bear song we recorded makes clear that the children's appearance as "human" and "bear" is a matter of their external form, which, under certain conditions, is transformable. Khanty, again like other Indigenous peoples, commonly acknowledge that the carcass of a skinned bear, except for its head, resembles a naked man. The widespread belief among Indigenous peoples that the body is a kind of clothing or outerwear and separate from the interior person recurs in Khanty and Mansi oral tradition (Ryndina, 2018). If, as the Bear Mother stories suggest, Bear and Man are twins, in the eastern Khanty view they are not identical but fraternal twins, identity with difference.

Moreover, one eastern Khanty, AS, told us that only bears, of all animals, have souls, and of the same number as human persons, five for a male, four for a female. AS told us there is a formulaic phrase in Khanty to speak of someone's death: – мэмi йәта – "he/she became a bear." This phrase, which is used for both men and women, regularly occurs today in two contexts: first, when leaving instructions for carrying on after one's death... "After I turn into a bear, you..."; and second, when talking to young children about death, they say, "S/he has turned into a bear." The process Khanty call *nyamsyng* whereby a deceased person may send his/her spirit into one or more other persons at their birth (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011: 68–69) at least once has been

reported to have occurred between a deceased person and a bear (Kulemzin, 1972: 97).

For Khanty, bears and humans, while not identical, are part of the same multispecies social order, one distinguished by regular face-to-face contact and communication, which creates and sustains their unique relationship and sense of communality. This social order is fundamentally a moral one (Fienup-Riordan, 2007; Reo & Whyte, 2012; Scott, 2006), established at the Beginning according to the songs of the bear ceremony and governing the behavior of both bear persons and Khanty people "made of flesh" in the world they share. Bear is due this respect, because Khanty lives depend upon him. Eastern Khanty understand that the bear carries hunting luck in his humped belt of fat, which is metaphorized in song as a Khanty birch bark rucksack. In Petr Kurlomkin's bear festival Song of the Forest Spirit, the forest spirit hunts the bear, "the Bog-forest glorious Beast", who carries a "strong box made of forest birch bark". Seeking the box, the hunter finds instead, "seven moose, a herd of moose,... fatty beasts with meat, skinned beasts with their skins" which he stalks and kills "stealthily, in the manner of the Bog-beast," attributing his success to the "Forest Bog Glorious Beast, I the one who got him" (Balalaeva et al., 2021: 33–38). But more generally, the lives of human persons in the forest depend upon Bear, as Yakov Tailakhov made clear in the closing prayer of a bear festival on Malyi Iugan River in 2016: "The lord of the swamps, the lord of the forests, you take their form, Yaoun—iki! [The patron deity of the B. Iugan River has the image of the Bear]. On the day that beasts are hunted, the day that the fish are sought, animals I pray they will harvest, fish I pray they will catch. In the coming winters, when we are trying to survive in our humble dwellings, forbid the consuming spirit to enter, forbid the gnawing spirit [of famine]. Be so merciful."

At the same time, Khanty have no illusions about Bear's general character. One of the principal songs of the bear festival which tells how the first Bear came down to earth describes him as "capricious, mischievous, even more you are malicious."<sup>4</sup> The bear is told that he will be settled on a rich land that will provide for him and that he should fill his belly with berries. His "grey-beard father Torum" gives him strict prohibitions that "below, on the lands, on the waters of men,/ From a Khanty man made of flesh,/ that which a Khanty man has,/ on the shore near the cat-tails, the fishing gear...you must not take." Using the same formulas, Bear is also instructed not to take anything from

<sup>4</sup> This song was sung by Petr Vassilievich Kurlomkin at a 1995 bear festival in Larlomkin and recorded by Timofei Moldanov, who made his video of this bear festival available to us. The song was transcribed in Khanty by Kurlomkin's daughter, Elena Surlomkina, who with Olga Balalaeva, translated it into Russian. Balalaeva and Wiget prepared the English translation.

“...the cache house supported on one leg...a herd of ten reindeer, a herd of twenty reindeer... the cornered, log grave house.” Nevertheless, after having been lowered down to earth on a silver chain by Torum, Bear robbed everything belonging to “the Khanty man made of flesh” he was prohibited to touch, even “ from the cornered, log grave house/ when you came near it/ from very beginning/ hundreds of decayed dead you dug up./Swamp-beast, you took them as Prey.”

As a consequence of these violations, Bear begins to starve and go blind, until, in his desperation, he tries to seize two cranes in a swamp. But just as he is about to pounce, two chains with iron hooks snag his opened maw, and yank him violently back to the sky world, where his father Torum shames him, saying “like everyone, you almost made it onto the narrow, correct path, almost.” After beating him severely, Torum literally kicks him out of the skyworld so that he tumbles down, eventually being caught in a high fork of a larch tree. Unable to free himself, Bear dies, and from his decaying body, worms and gall drip down to the ground, from there in the summer, twin bears, male and female cubs, appear. These bears fill themselves with bunches of bird cherries and other tasty things, and living well, they set a good example by obediently passing by all the Khanty things prohibited to them.

By contrast to the disobedient first bear, in another eastern Khanty bear festival song, obedient bears are rewarded by being the invited guests at a bear festival created in their honor.<sup>5</sup> Not every bear killed is given a bear festival. Typically, among eastern Khanty the Bear Festival was a consequence of a special hunt organized for the specific purpose of gathering the community to honor the bear. The full skin of the field-dressed bear, with paws and head still attached, is carried into the house on a special cradle as honored guest and set on a raised platform, in a special indoor “house” made of interleaved wood strips. The bear’s neck, spine, liver and heart are put in a special basin behind the bear’s head and covered with the skin of the bear to which to the head is still attached. In front of the basin the bear’s head is placed between its forepaws, dressed with beads and jewellery, covered with a scarf, and coins set over its the eyes. Each day begins by attendees

approaching the Bear to honor it by bending from the waist to kiss first the bear’s head and paws before turning three times sunwise and leaving its presence. Even women, whose contact with bear is otherwise very restricted, must do so (Fig. 2).

After the greeting, costumed singers wearing birchbark masks perform mythological songs concerning the bear’s origin and experiences and improvised comic sketches dramatizing hunting or sexual behaviour. The day ends with the song to “put the bear to sleep” and the bear’s head is covered with the shawl. Feasting marks the interval between each day. On the last day, specific costumed personages specific to regional traditions come before the bear (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2022). Northern Khanty and Mansi celebrations conclude as they began, with the guests approaching the bear, bowing and kissing it, but the Eastern Khanty celebration ends in a radically different manner with the creation of a sky-road of white cloth spread over bunches of dried grass laid from the bear’s house altar to the door over which the bear is carried out of the house. The bear festival releases the bear’s spirit to journey homeward to share the news of how well he was treated and to return again in another life (Watanabe, 1994). After the festival, the bear’s disarticulated but unbroken bones are released into water without a current to be the framework upon which the bear’s spirit will create a new incarnation. The bear’s skull is put up on the roof or ledge of the cache house or left together with the skin and the forepaws and preserved in a place of honor (Fig. 3).

In contrast to such veneration, bears who attack human beings and their settlements may be killed and disposed of without ceremony. It would be a mistake to characterize these simply as retaliatory killings; by violating Torum’s moral prohibitions such bears incurred liability for their actions and deserve punishment. A very traditional older Tromegan River Khanty, SV, who acknowledged having killed three bears in his life, related the following episode to us, which highlights the moral code binding bears and humans and the communication between them. He began by explaining, “I don’t track bears on purpose. I don’t touch them [“touch” is commonly used to mean “to hit, injure or kill”]. But when the bear touches me, I touch them.” Such language is often heard when Indigenous peoples try to characterize a “culture of tolerance.” (Gebresenbet et al., 2018; Van Lanen et al., 2012: 107) SV continued:

This bear for three years killed a lot of reindeer. A lot of reindeer, they ate or just killed for nothing. At first it was only one bear, then there were two, and finally there were six bears. They came in pairs, two by two, male and female, three different pairs, not six all at once. I also started to run here and there, [yelling] Come out, show yourself, and they understood, even my *mat'* (obscenities). [AW: *You called to them.*

<sup>5</sup> This song was sung by Nikolai Petrovich Kuplandeyev at a bear festival in Larlomkiny settlement in 1995 and recorded by Timofei Moldanov, who made his video of this bear festival available to us. The song was transcribed in Khanty by Elena Surlomkina, who with Olga Balalaeva, translated it into Russian. Balalaeva and Wiget prepared the English translation. The full text, as well as a lengthy video presentation of the eastern Khanty bear festival is available online at: [https://eloka-arctic.org/sites/default/files/%D0%9A%D3%99%D0%B9%D3%99%D3%88%D0%BA%D1%8D%D0%BC\\_%D0%BA%D3%99%D0%B9%D0%B0\\_%D0%B9%D0%BE%D0%B9%D3%99%D3%88\\_Song\\_of\\_Coming\\_of\\_Bear.pdf](https://eloka-arctic.org/sites/default/files/%D0%9A%D3%99%D0%B9%D3%99%D3%88%D0%BA%D1%8D%D0%BC_%D0%BA%D3%99%D0%B9%D0%B0_%D0%B9%D0%BE%D0%B9%D3%99%D3%88_Song_of_Coming_of_Bear.pdf).



**Fig. 2** Greeting the Bear Guest at the bear ceremony with a kiss (Photo by Andrew Wiget)

*So that you could shoot him? (He avoids the word "shoot")*] I yelled at him so that he should show himself, and not hide. He killed my reindeer.

*AW: And they even understood mat' [cursing]?*

*SV: Yes. And two of them showed themselves, the biggest ones.*

*AW: Showed themselves so you could kill them?*

*SV: Yes, I laid them down (R., zavalit') [again, not "killed"]. The first one I shot had been previously injured. [He's trying to explain his behavior not only to us but to the bear] If you were injured [by me], you should have shown me that the blood has already started to run, then I would not be running towards you. If there is blood running, you can leave, but if there is no blood, you should stay where you are. But he stood up, showing himself. I made three shots. The first shot hit a tree and the second the bear, but he let the bear go away. The second bear was standing up and I ran directly towards him, lifted my gun and shot him. In the end, the first bear [the wounded one]*

*turned around and slowly started to go away, and I asked him, "Why are you going away? Wait up for me?" and the bear stopped for a bit, he was tired, and then he moved on, and there was a forest there, and I lost him.*

*AW: Should the bear that killed the reindeer have stayed?*

*SV: Yes, he should have even stood up and stopped a little [surrendering himself to be shot], but then he went away. We had then about 60 head, and the bears got 30.*

*The first time the bears killed so many reindeer, I started to scold them, "You should not just ravage them, I said to them, you know what I will do to you, you do have a father, I will talk to your father [Torum]. I fetched 7 meters of fabric, and where I found them [the reindeer] I tied the fabric [as an offering], and then I said to the bears' father [Torum], 'You should punish your sons and daughters. If they attack my reindeer, they should eat it to the end, and leave just one bone*





**Fig. 3** (left) Clothed Bear's head and forepaws preserved for home veneration, Tromegan River; (right) Bear skulls placed on roof for protection, B. Yugan River

for me.' And now when the bears catch reindeer they do eat it only until the small bones are left. Those bears really were misbehaving.

From time to time, a bear may attack and kill a human being. Such a bear is especially despicable. A Yugan Khanty man, NS, told us how a bear killed a man who had gone out getting "squirrels, and he climbed over a hillock that was a bear's den. The bear jumped out and attacked him from behind and killed him. They didn't find the bear because he ran away. He knew he committed a crime and ran away. And it was very difficult to catch him. This was some time ago." This bear was deemed to have been fully aware that what he had done was not just a horrible incident, but a guilt-inducing transgression, and so NS used the Russian word for "a crime" [R., *prestuplenie*]. If such man-killing bears are killed, customarily they are burned whole. The destruction of the whole bear by fire precludes it from having any further lives.

The moral code that governs bears also binds humans. Khanty tradition permits the hunting of bears, but this must be done within the frame of customary practices which treat the bear as an intelligent, conscious, and powerful agent distinct from but equal to a human person. One who has found a bear's den doesn't return to tell about it excitedly, but may simply put a cedar branch in his hat to silently signal the discovery. NS remembered, "When we go hunting bear, one should not talk about it, and not drink alcohol, just go hunting, and, one should not hunt other animals on the way

even if a capercaillie is sitting just above your head, you should ignore it. When we go there with a whole company, no one should touch [shoot] anything running around or flying around, no way, that's the rule. When they got to the den, they would have tea not far away from the den. They would make a fire, sit around, drink tea, but not say a word about their purpose."

In order not to incur guilt from the ritual killing of the bear, hunters try to deceive the bear, sometimes by pretending to be Russians. In addition to the use of special language and other strategies of deception, the bear is addressed as a person, out of respect. The bear is addressed as Old Man or some similar honorific, and the manner in which it is skinned in the field suggests an undressing of a person, the hunters calling out as the bear is skinned, "I am removing the first button," and so on, sometimes even putting pieces of wood on the bear's belly to serve as buttons. When the bear is killed ritually, the hunters must mark a nearby tree with the sign of the bear, which is a top view of the bear's head flanked by paws, and adjacent to it cut slashes indicating the number of men in the hunting party (Fig. 4).

One must show respect for the slain bear and cannot boast of an easy kill, give its meat to dogs and women, cut it with an axe, carelessly break its bones or throw them in the mud.

Awareness of sharing the world with bears is especially underscored on those occasions when Khanty are most likely to encounter bears, such as when gathering pine nuts or berrying. Several Yugan Khanty women told us, in almost identical words, "When I was a child in the forest with my





**Fig. 4** Tree marked after successful hunt (Photo by Andrew Wiget)

parents gathering berries, and we found bear tracks, I was told, “Put some berries in the bear’s track so the bear won’t frighten us.” In any case, one should never casually pronounce the word ‘bear’, in Khanty *pupi*, but employ circumlocutions, commonly substituting another name, *Memi* (not really translatable) or *Yipukh* “The terrible one”, or one may use circumlocutions such as “meat” (K., *tekush*). Khanty who are members of the Bear Clan must refer to the bear as “younger brother”, but others should still invoke some more distant relationship. And a special “bear language” of epithets has evolved for discussing bears, which are displayed most openly in song texts associated with the Bear Festival (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011: 137).

Khanty persons who fail to respect the bear’s unique status incur liability for violating the norms of the relationship. For example, NS told us that bears should not be hunted after March 20 because, as in the event reported at the beginning of this article, a she-bear may be caring for newborn cubs. He told us that on his very first bear hunt as a youth, the leader of the hunting group killed a she-bear and

the three newborn cubs “so young they couldn’t yet open their eyes.” This was taken as a bad sign, and as a result that hunter and his wife and baby drowned that spring. He himself, more than sixty at the time of our interview, still didn’t want to talk about it. “I was a young kid. Fifteen. I didn’t know anything. It was my first time. There were adults there.” Liability is also implied in other narratives we recorded when the Khanty person puts off the bear, saying, “What bad thing did I ever do to you? Go away, go away!” or ““What sin [Ru., *grekh*] did I make against you? I never sinned against you. Whatever harm did I do to you? I haven’t sinned towards you.”

In 2019, GK, a Khanty woman from Malyi Yugan River, told us the following family story. She herself married a man who hosted bear festivals, and, as she recounts below, she grew up in a household that had a relationship with bears. Her story weaves together many of these themes and illustrates that even in case of the most extreme violation, one must have respect for the bear.

The bear understands human language. My mother witnessed that. She herself was from Ob’ River, and when she was a girl about 14-15, her father, my grandfather, was keeping about 4-5 horses at that time. There was a village there with horses and cows. One day the horses rushed back home, they were frightened, and the upper part of one horse’s hindquarters was gashed. It was clear that it was a bear which had injured the horse. And all the men in the village at the time, five of them, went to hunt the bear, and followed its tracks. At the time there were very tall cattails on the river. And the bear understood what he had done, so he left all these tracks through the cattails, and then he circled back and took a position lying down next to the road. The men were going single file along the path, and the bear jumped out and attacked the last one and only after that the hunters in turn killed him. The bear simply fell down dead on top of this dead man. Then they brought the bear back to the village. And my mother’s uncle, my grandfather’s brother, Dedushka [Grandfather] Mikhail, after they skinned the bear, he started to insult it, to kick the bear [carcass or skin?] and throw it [the skin] around, yelling at him, scolding and shaming him for having killed a man.

It was 1946, and that’s what Mikhail did. He kicked the bear and hit the bear, and scolded him and cursed him. The people around him said that he shouldn’t have done it, they tried to stop him, they told him it was not the thing to treat a bear like that, but he would not listen to them, and my father said that as a result the Bear has been pursuing this man, Mikhail, all his life. Mikhail said he didn’t believe in any such powers like that [of the bear], though the people had warned

him, and as a result, my father said that Mikhail had invited his own trouble and caused the bear to pursue him his whole life.

And whenever he went to fish or to hunt, the Bear was chasing him everywhere. Once my father and Mikhail went to the lake to fish for crucian [R., *karas'* ], and they checked the nets and decided to stay overnight. And Mikhail said, “Let’s lay down by the water, on the bank by the water, because the bear will come for me.” At first, my father didn’t believe him. And they decided to lay down by where the small river went into the lake, by the boat. There was no tent that time, so they put *polog* [mosquito net] for their bed and they were still by the fire. It was June, and it was still light, and Ded Mikhail said, “Look there, across the lake.” And on the other side of the lake, there was kind of a ball rolling, with huge speed, like a bullet, they can go up to 50-60 kph. My father said at first he couldn’t understand what it was, and Grandpa Mikhail said, “There, he is running.” So they jumped into the boat and went off.

And so that’s how my father was persuaded [that a bear had been after Mikhail his whole life], and my mother too, and they believed that, and Ded Mikhail himself always went fishing only by himself, he didn’t try to take anyone, because he said “The Bear is chasing me.” But this one time, when he took my father along, he had warned him, he said, “The Bear is chasing me. He will come for me.” My father didn’t believe it, but then he said he saw it with his own eyes. He [the bear] did come, and he was rolling like a ball. He was rolling with great speed, and they jumped into the boat and got away, and that’s reality, and we know it for sure, that’s how it is. The bear hears and the bear understands.

Although onlookers in the story sympathized with GK’s great uncle venting his anger toward the murdering bear, they nevertheless judged he had gone too far in kicking and insulting the carcass of the bear. Even though the bear deserved to be killed for having killed a man, the insults and abuse heaped upon that individual bear resonated with Bear, who avenged himself by sending other bears after this man his whole life.

The story underscores the Khanty belief that Bear is the ultimate arbiter of justice. Not only can Bear punish those who violate his social contract with them, but several stories tell how he also enacts justice among men.

Last year, in the settlement Rabochy, a bear killed a woman. She was a very ill-tempered woman who quarreled with everyone. Another woman wished out loud, “If only a bear would kill you.” The bear dragged the

woman out of the house—she was drunk—tore out her eyes, her heart and ate it. He ate it because she was bad-tempered, and it was wished that she would be killed by a bear (Kulemzin & Lukina, 1978:153)

We recorded a similarly-themed story from a young Khanty man who had heard it from his father:

My father told me that at one time there was a settlement of many yurts on Demyanka, not just Khanty but other people living there. There was an orphan living at this village. Everybody there mistreated him. When the people came to the bear’s den, they took this orphan along, to use him as bait. They threw him in the den there as bait. The boy rolled off the bear’s back and hid in the corner. It was a she bear. She awaked, jumped out of the den, and all the men who came from the village, she killed and then went away. Only the orphan remained alive. He returned to the village, and was asked, “Where is everybody?” “Everyone was eaten by the bear.” “And you?” “I was in the den hiding there, and the bear just went away.” I don’t know if this is a true story or not.

Whether in fact such a social horror actually took place, the point is that it is Bear who metes out justice. Historical sources mention that Ob-Ugrians swore oaths on a bear’s head, and bear’s heads preserved from a bear festival are kept by some Khanty and Mansi families today. On the Bolshoi Yugan River, where eastern Khanty preserve bear skulls not whole heads, ES told us of the custom to chop at a bear’s skull to taunt the bear and summon him. “They even introduce, name themselves saying ‘If I am not guilty [R., *vinovat*], you won’t harm me. If I am guilty, I’ll be punished for that.’ It’s only done in special cases, when there is a really serious quarrel, an irresolvable conflict between families, even between kin. We heard that on Demyanka they quarreled very seriously, and they did that. But such things practically never happen, they are such a rare thing, maybe once in a hundred years.” This very old belief among the Ob-Ugrians had its ultimate cultic realization in the complex periodic bear festivals among the Northern Khanty and Mansi at Vezhakory, where the Elder of the Sacred Town in his Bear Avatar resolved interfamily feuds before the representative of all the families (Baulo, 2016).

For Khanty, bears are unique among all the animal persons, kin and not-kin, kin of a different kind. Today’s bears are understood to still participate in some way in those extraordinary characteristics which distinguish Bear from other animal-persons. These include the ability to understand human thought and speech, to value respect and perceive insult, and in response to distribute agency across the species to the individual bears of a particular age, gender, biography and territory one meets in the forest.

## Implications for Reimagining Bear-Human Relationships

Incorporating Indigenous experience and Local/Traditional Environmental Knowledge (LEK/TEK) into the fundamentally anthropocentric, reductionist character of colonialist management discourse is immensely challenging everywhere (Berkes, 2012; Roothan, 2019). While Canadian and US First Nations rightly chafe at the limitations settler governments put on their sovereignty, Indigenous peoples in many countries, including Russia, have never had any recognition of their sovereignty or even the most limited right to land tenure and self-governance. Conservation policies and programs which derive from Indigenous sovereignty are proscribed for these peoples. This is true not only of exceptional programs, such as the tribal Grizzly Bear Treaty (Piikani Nation, 2016) or the collaborations of BC's Great Bear Rainforest (Artelle et al., 2021), but even of more common practices, such as co-management or the requirement for mandatory effective consultation.

Moreover, many contemporary Indigenous communities are often so fragmented, so factionalized by education, economic disparity, military experience, cultural politics, and religious conversion, that it can be difficult to identify a single coherent and shared native perspective, even when the community is fronted by recognized representation. Differences among age cohorts are significant because they reflect differences in acculturation. Today's older people might have first hunted bears as youths in a group with their parents, as NS did, but younger Khanty, however, have grown up in post-Soviet world shaped by eleven years of boarding school, consumerism, mass culture, and Christian sects that have arrived with a new sociality and new theology of nature (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2007). It's not uncommon to hear something like the following we recorded:

My father ... did everything then according to tradition and brought the bear inside through the roof, etc. And then everyone forgot about that [traditional way]. My father stopped doing that, and we don't do it anymore. We, I think, turned to Christianity. God created the bear, and we worshipped it, which was bad, because it is paganism. While I was still at school we did it a couple of times, and then we stopped doing that. It's not necessary. And it's bad I think.

As a result, some younger Khanty are just as likely to model sport hunting or poaching techniques, which demonstrate lack of respect for bears. One Khanty youth was known to have killed five in one autumn season when he was in his mid-twenties. He admitted he often used baited snares and would shoot the snared bear in the head. The youth said he didn't learn this from father who hadn't hunted bears a

long time, he said, and who never told him any stories about bears. This young man would quickly skin the bear, taking with him only the skin with the head and paws attached, the fat and the gall bladder, all of which he sold for small money. "And what did you do with the meat?" we asked. "In the old way, the meat should be cooked with the bones and then deposited in a closed backwater. But I left it right there."

The 2017 incident discussed at the beginning of this article underscores a number of problems that might not have arisen under other conditions worth discussing. Most clearly, in the face of such a large and healthy population of brown bears, a management philosophy which is based purely on the licensed killing of individual bears seems pointlessly draconian. Such a regulatory regime also takes no account of the fact that Khanty have effectively managed to share the taiga environment with bears for centuries, before the coming of the Russians, firearms and regulatory regimes. And so, despite these challenges, we believe reflecting on the Khanty experience might offer some insights into the possibilities for developing a coexistence regime for sharing the world with bears.

First, while acknowledging that social-ecological systems are complex and that LEK/TEK should always be carefully evaluated, a coexistence regime should take seriously local/traditional understandings that the cultural significance of some species, especially large carnivores, justifies a tolerable level of risk. Carter and Linnell argue "adaptation in this context means that humans and carnivores are able to change their behavior, learn from experience, and pursue their own interests with respect to each other... [so that] mutual adaptations... result in minimal negative impacts of humans and carnivores on each other" (2016: 577) Among Indigenous peoples of the northern hemisphere, it seems that in this regard, bears need to be thought of differently, even from other carnivores. There is certainly no question that local communities of humans and bears learn from each other (Smith, 1991:25–28; Swenson, 1999; Isabella, 2018; Toncheva & Fletcher, 2022). Special attention should be paid to the ways in which human community practices enact "soft institutional regulations". Sometimes these are behavioral norms, such as the proscription against hunting bears in their den after mid-March. Others call attention to ecological relationships, such as avoiding hunting other game while going to hunt bear, or the use of the Siberian stone pine, both as the hunter's silent announcement of successfully locating a bear's den and as a metonym for the bear's forest when tied to the bear's house during the bear festival.

Second, in human-bear interactions, the behavior of bears as well as humans might profitably be understood as individual and not simply as species behavior (Fagen & Fagen, 1996; Berezcky, 2016). John Knight has argued contra Ingold (2002) that "Encounters between human hunters



and wild animals they hunt are episodic and unrepeated... hunters necessarily lack familiarity with the individual animals they hunt, even if, as they gain experience over time, they acquire a generic familiarity with the patterns of behavior associated with the kind of animal in question” (2020: 4) But the persuasiveness of this objection depends on subsistence model of hunting, which was never the case for bear hunting among the Khanty, and is more than not unlikely for brown bears generally. Bears are not “prey animals”. And it is patently inaccurate to assume that among the Khanty bears “arouse little or no moral concern as individuals.” (2020:5).

Lastly, management policies should recognize that ceremony, storytelling and hunting/foraging are mutually reinforcing occasions for cultural continuity (Clark & Slocombe, 2009; Zoe, 2012) and for the transmission of the knowledge that we and bears are both kin and not-kin. Where possible, conservation and cultural heritage agencies should cooperate on the Alaska example in carving out exceptions for traditional foraging practices that provide intergenerational learning experiences, especially ceremonial. They should work together to foster the connection between traditional hunting practices and values and other cultural forms such as ceremony and storytelling. In KhMAO today, acculturative forces have eroded the bear festival as a living tradition associated with hunting practice, and it is being supplanted by a revival of the Bear Festival as cultural performance. Such a trend heightens the polarization between “cultural” bears and living bears and contributes to the objectification and commodification of bears familiar in sport hunting and population management schemes, which in turn incentivizes behavior like that of the young Khanty hunter just mentioned above.

The mutuality of being that characterizes the relationship between Khanty and bears does not fit well with current models of multispecies ethnography (Ingold, 2002, Nadasdy, 2007, Willerslev, 2007, Armstrong Oma, 2010, Knight, 2020), conservation, or wildlife management (Kaltenborn & Linnell, 2022; Glikman et al., 2021). Place/community-based management that incorporates Indigenous knowledge derived from the long local history of multispecies relationships has been invoked to indigenize the North American Model of conservation (Hessami et al., 2021) and offers some promise of fit. But instrumentalizing a conservation policy with the goal of coexistence in a world shared with bears will require a significant transformation of social and political priorities. These will certainly come too late for the Khanty, though perhaps not too late for bears.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** This research was approved by the Internal Review Board of New Mexico State University.

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