

Logging Took Trees the Bears Called Home, so the Haida Nation Built Them New Dens

“it’s got to be just right, just like the Goldilocks.”

Sonal Gupta

October 10, 2026



Elijah Washington, Haida member and stewardship technician with the Council of the Haida Nation, sits in front of a bear den he and his crew created. **Sonal Gupta/Canada's National Observer**

Elijah Washington pushes through wet ferns and branches left by logging, crossing the mossy forest floor on Haida Gwaii. He kneels beside a massive western red cedar stump.

The cedar was felled decades ago during the industrial logging boom that cleared swaths of old growth across the archipelago off British Columbia's north coast, leaving a hollow, decaying stump.

Its top has since been trimmed with a chainsaw to fit a plywood sheet, capped with weather-resistant roofing material and covered with thick green moss collected from the surrounding woods. Near the base, an opening roughly the width of Washington's safety helmet leads into a sheltered hollow lined with moss.

"You just want it to be small enough for a mother bear to move in," said Washington, a stewardship technician with the Haida Nation. "So it's got to be just right, just like the Goldilocks, [the entrance] can't be too big, can't be too wide."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2GvboWgcbo>

Haida Nation stewardship technician Elijah Washington explains how crews choose old cedar stumps to turn into bear dens. Video by: Sonal Gupta / Canada's National Observer

The retrofitted stump is one of seven the Council of the Haida Nation had modified this summer to provide winter shelter for the coastal black bear, known in the Haida

language as *taan*. Found nowhere else in the world, this subspecies of black bear is among the largest in North America.

A bear's winter den may bring to mind a rocky cave, but coastal black bears in BC rely heavily on large old-growth trees and the hollow logs and stumps they leave behind. Decades of logging have removed many of those shelters, however—and the younger trees growing in their place have yet to develop hollows large enough for bears, said Helen Davis, a wildlife biologist working with the Haida Nation to identify and restore bear dens.

Cubs are born weighing about a pound, with their eyes still closed. They need a dry, protected place where their mothers can nurse them through the winter, and they stay there for up to 100 days. “The only place where bears can have babies is in a den,” Davis said. “And so these dens are critical to population sustainability.”

The old trees bears need for shelter are also sought-after by the logging industry. BC has expanded protections and temporary logging pauses, but old-growth harvesting continues. In August, BC Forests Minister Ravi Parmar said stopping it altogether would shut down the sector.

Davis has heard that argument for years. People repeatedly suggested making shelters from melted tires or culverts instead of leaving old-growth trees for bears.

“People would just sort of throw that out somewhat frequently and since nobody seems to want to conserve old growth for them, I was like, ‘Well, fine, then let’s see if we can build them,’” Davis said.

Now, the first-of-its kind program could set a model for bear conservation worldwide. But in providing an alternative to simply protecting old-growth, some worry building dens gives an easy excuse for logging to continue without pause.

Lisa White, a councillor with the Old Massett Village Council, said the sight of plywood laid over old-growth stumps was difficult to bear. “I actually cried,” she said. The plywood roofs, she said, showed how deeply the land had been damaged: bears now needed people to help provide their shelter.

White said Haida people had needed wood long before commercial logging. Thousands used it for homes, canoes, clothing and heat, yet the forests appeared virtually untouched to the first newcomers, she said. People selected individual trees, used them fully and left the surrounding forest standing, so animals could continue living there, including northern goshawks, which are at risk of disappearing from the islands. The Haida also were known to pull entire planks from trees without felling them, leaving the tree standing.

White worries about how well the second-growth forests surrounding the modified dens will hold up through winter. She has seen extensive blowdown in those stands and is concerned about placing shelters among trees vulnerable to the islands’ storms.

“It’s also the forest around them that needs to be strong,” she said.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLs2hE0Matw>



Washington stands in front of a natural bear den in a living cedar. **Sonal Gupta**
/ **Canada's National Observer**

Old Massett councillor Lisa White reflects on the importance of bears to the Haida and what happens when their home is lost. Video by Sonal Gupta / Canada's National Observer

Sometimes, loggers discover a bear den only after cutting into it.

Davis, who has been studying coastal black bear dens since the early 1990s, recalled stories from loggers: "They cut into trees and a bear popped out—or worse, they cut into a bear."

Those accounts led to a three-year provincial government study with forestry company Canfor to investigate whether black bears needed large trees for dens.

Davis tracked radio-collared bears to roughly 65 dens; her field research confirmed that bears were almost entirely dependent on large, hollow old-growth trees and that second-growth forests left them with virtually no options.

At the time, despite the rate of loss of old-growth forest in the province, the research didn't set off alarm bells. "I don't think they thought they'd run out of old growth," she said.

But building a den meant manually crafting what a living cedar takes centuries to create. As a cedar grows, fungi can slowly rot the wood at its centre, creating a hollow large enough for a bear while the tree remains alive. Forests managed for timber are often logged again before those chambers develop, so the new trees do not replace the dens lost when old growth is cut.

Davis began working with Taan Forest, the Haida-owned forestry company in 2019, teaching staff to identify natural bear dens and convert suitable stumps into new ones. The company was already restoring streamside forests damaged by earlier logging and adding den restoration became a natural extension of that work, said Jeff Mosher, its chief forester.

“Protecting bears is a priority, even if it means a lower dividend,” Mosher said.

Taan Forest has since created six dens across the Mamin River, Survey Creek and Ghost Creek watersheds on Graham Island, in northern Haida Gwaii, Mosher said.

Mosher said bears usually took about a year to start using the shelters, though they checked out one new den almost immediately. Signs of use at other modified stumps encouraged Taan to build more. Bears used one of the dens through the winter and spring of 2023 and have returned annually since.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RplhB_n5W54

Bears have used and returned to one of Taan Forest’s modified dens each year since 2023. Footage courtesy of Taan Forest and compiled by Sonal Gupta/Canada’s National Observer

Those results also encouraged the nation to expand the effort, Washington said. His crew spent the summer searching previously logged forests for stumps with a hollow large enough for a bear and an entrance leading inside. Davis helped the council secure funding from the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation and spent a week in July teaching the crew to scout stumps, assess their suitability and turn them into dens using chainsaws, plywood and moss.

The crew is also trying to make the new shelters smell familiar. When the Haida crew comes across a bear that has died, they respectfully collect some of its hair to place in some of the modified dens, a trick Davis has tested elsewhere in the field with encouraging results.

By the end of October, the team plans to complete three more dens, bringing the total to 10 modified sites across Haida Gwaii ready for winter monitoring. The exact locations of the sites are being withheld to prevent exposing denning bears to hunters.

Haida members remain concerned about black bears killed for their gallbladders, which contain bile sought for use in some traditional Asian medicines. BC bans possession of bear gallbladders or bile and prohibits their trade.

Washington said that while the nation’s presence on the land has helped protect bears from such hunting, the killings still occur. Haida members have reported seeing bears left dead on the side of the road with the paws cut off and gallbladder removed.

Tracing his hand over a living western red cedar in a different part of the forest, Washington points to the distinct tool marks left by a traditional adze. Sometime in the early 1900s, he estimates, Haida ancestors cut into the tree to see if it could be used for a house pole. Finding rot at the core, they left it standing. Bears later widened the opening with their teeth and claws, turning the hollow into a natural den, its floor already lined with soft cedar bedding and green branches still growing above.

This den sits high in the tree, which is among the safest places for a female bear to raise cubs, Washington said. But his crew cannot recreate one at that height.

The modified dens also provide only temporary shelter. “They’re dead stumps and so they’re rotting and they won’t be there forever,” Davis said.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veldEkXf0CA>

A bear den inside a living cedar tree culturally modified by the Haida in the 1900s. The tree has also been used as a den by bears. Video by Sonal Gupta/Canada’s National Observer

But shelter is only part of what a bear needs. Noel Bellis, an Old Massett member of the Haida Nation and a carver, grew up in a logging family and later worked in cedar forests. After visiting modified dens and attending workshops, he believes bears would move in but questions whether they would find enough food nearby. When bears come out in spring, they feed on green vegetation, including horsetail, fireweed shoots, salmonberry shoots, and grasses.

But in the second-growth forests he has visited, deer have eaten much of the low-growing vegetation, leaving little for bears to forage. “It’s a moss lawn between trees,” he said.

Nearby salmon streams provide a seasonal source of food, but Bellis worries about what bears will find once those runs end each year. He wants den-building accompanied by efforts to restore food plants, using cages to protect young growth from deer until it grows beyond their reach. “It will cost money, but that’s what the costs of clear-cutting are going to be,” he said.

Davis agrees bears need both shelter and feeding areas within their home ranges, where they generally remain to den. “They don’t just pick up and march off to some far-flung patch of remaining old growth and all den there together,” Davis said.

Taan Forest is opening gaps in the canopy to encourage shrubs to grow, with at least two modified dens in or beside those restoration areas, Davis added.

When Barney Edgars worked along Haida Gwaii’s creeks as a fisheries guardian, his crew carried air horns and flares but rarely needed them. The Elders who raised him had taught him to respect bears and speak to them when their paths crossed: “You go your way, I’ll go my way.”

“We were taught that everything we grew up with had a spirit,” said Edgars, a Haida Elder.

He recalled an older woman fishing for sockeye salmon when a bear and its cub approached her net. She threw the bear a fish and told it to leave the net alone. It never returned, he said.

Earlier generations ate bears and used the whole animal. His grandmother asked him to hunt one for her, though he never did. Travellers also followed bear trails through northern Haida Gwaii, finding routes between waterways on the journey from Massett toward Naden Harbour.



Wildlife biologist Helen Davis inside a stump's hollow chamber in July 2026. **Elijah Washington**

Neither Edgars nor his grandparents had heard of a bear attack on the islands, he said. But he worries that losing forests and feeding grounds will push bears into communities to rummage through garbage, increasing the possibility of conflict.

Fears about conflict with bears are new to the Haida. "They used to sleep under the trees and there was never any fear of that... I never learned any fear from my grandfather about bears," White said.

Washington said Haida people want to know whether bears are healthy, have enough food and have places to live. Monitoring the new dens will help answer part of that question.

Cameras facing the den entrances will record activity year-round while their crew stay away from roughly October to April to avoid disturbing bears. After winter, the crew will review the footage to see which shelters bears explored and which they used as dens.

Hair naturally caught at den entrances can be tested for DNA to help show whether the same bears return year after year or others move in.

Even if bears take to the shelters, the crew does not plan to turn every suitable stump into a den. Once one is finished, workers move to another area, leaving space between shelters to limit competition for food and places to raise cubs.

"We don't want to create a whole community out here," he said. "We want to have like one bear that's safe enough to come out here."



Washington, center, with crew members at a stump den site in July 2026.**Elijah Washington**

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