

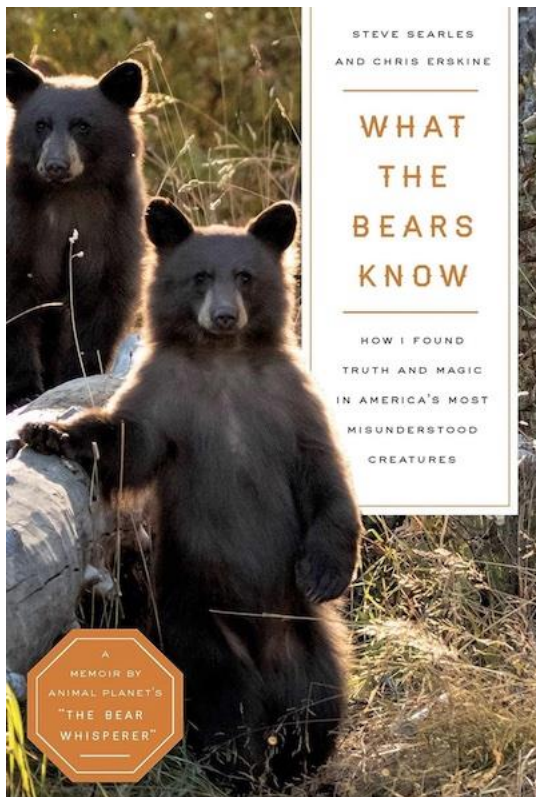
What Do Bears Know and Feel?

Authors Interviewed by [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

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"The incredible story of how one man went from a hired hunter to becoming one of America's top champions for this iconic animal."

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Steve Searles and Chris Erskine's new book is a fascinating and inspiring read.

I love learning about the fascinating nonhumans with whom we share our magnificent planet. When I learned about Steve Searles and Chris Erskine's new book [What the Bears Know: How I Found Truth and Magic in America's Most Misunderstood Creatures—A Memoir by Animal Planet's "The Bear Whisperer,"](#) I couldn't wait to read it and learn more about it from the authors. I am pleased Steve and Chris could take the time to answer some questions about their wonderful new book.

Marc Bekoff: Why did you write *What the Bears Know*?

Steve Searles (SS): I'm the luckiest person in the world. I feel I've lived a hundred men's lives. I wanted to tell that story, and for readers to benefit from my triumphs and errors. No other animal has inspired such deep philosophical questions as bears have. A giraffe? A hippo? I think those

animals are amazing—I can't look away. But it's the bear that for thousands of years has brought out such reverence among humans. When people are in proximity to a bear, they look inside their own souls and minds. Why? That's what we get at in this book. If you see a bear, you remember the time of day, which way the wind was blowing. It's almost an [out-of-body experience](#). Again, a giraffe just doesn't bring that out in us.

MB: How does your book relate to your backgrounds and general areas of interest?

Chris Erskine (CE): In story after story after story, Steve shows a therapist's feel for the emotions of bears. I never saw anything like it. I love nature, and this project took me eight layers deeper in my understanding of the wilderness—and of our relationship to it.

SS: In the state of California, there are 35,000 bears and 40 million of some of the dumbest people you could ever imagine. Yet encounters rarely go south, even as people behave like total idiots around bears. I've seen them cry, scream, play dead. I've seen them run at and away from bears. But a bear just keeps being a bear. That's what intrigues me to no end. There is no sense of retaliation among these magnificent animals. Ultimately, I thought that they might provide lessons for fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. [Resilience](#). Courage. Patience. [Spirituality](#). All those traits that seem to be missing in humans these days.

MB: Who is your intended audience?

SS: Anyone who wants to overcome imaginary fears. Black bears are metaphors for all the things we demonize because we don't understand them. Whether it's people from other cultures, other countries, folks with different beliefs. Every generation finds something else to hate on, whether it's witches or rednecks. Well, black bears fall victim to that as well. Hikers [fear](#) them because they don't understand them. Yet, they are not predators. They are not after us. This story is about my mountain town overcoming those unnecessary fears. Over time, Mammoth Lakes becomes a "sanctuary city" for wildlife. That has led us to become a very tolerant town in many other aspects, be it different [sexual](#) orientations or [ethnicity](#). Without us even realizing it, the bears led us to that sense of coexistence.

Chris Erskine: This book is for anyone fed up with the savagery of social media. Literally, it's a walk in the woods with Steve, a [wise](#) and funny Bilbo Baggins ... an outdoorsman who really gets it.

MB: What are some of the topics you weave into your book and what are some of your major messages?

SS: When I arrived at a bear call, police and bystanders would thank me for coming and stand back to watch me solve it. But what I tried to do was give them some of the tools and the mindset to handle the situation themselves. I hoped this might translate into other areas of their lives, where they could show a little more courage and [confidence](#) than they otherwise might. Imagine if everywhere you went, the crowds parted as they took your photo, women gasped and hid their children. Imagine how that would affect your sense of self. Well, that happens every time a bear turns up. Humans treat them like Viking invaders. But the biggest bears I ever worked with, almost 700 pounds, were as gentle as a cub. They are not bullies.

MB: How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

SS: I don't think there's any comparison at all. We intentionally decided not to cover all the biology that has been covered so well in other books. We wanted to share the spiritual and psychological side of bears—even their sense of mysticism. We wanted folks to look at bears through the right lens.

MN: Why this book now?

CE: We now have bears coast to coast, their home ranges are expanding. Encounters are up, and social media leads to heightened awareness. This is the time to change our negative perceptions that are based on campfire stories or old German folklore. Inherently, bears seem to understand more about co-existence than humans do. Co-existence is key. Maybe we can take some cues from them.

SS: We live in reactionary times. The world's gone mad. Bears are a cure, not one of the problems. Early man saw bears as a resource to be harvested: as dinner, or something with which to make a jacket. Today, many people see them as nuisances. The prevalence of bears isn't something that's gone wrong. They represent something that has gone right. With the steady drumbeat of bad news about the climate, we see this indicator species thriving.

We should celebrate that. It's like seeing a rainbow or a shooting star. People ask me all the time what they should do when they come across a bear. I say, take a breath, hug your kid, whisper in their ear: "Aren't we lucky? We get to see a bear."