

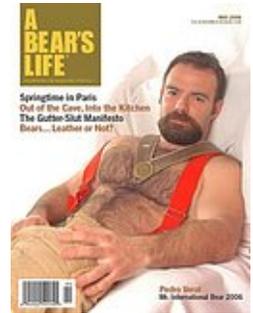


Bear Movement

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Less a unitary social movement than an alternate mode of gay male identification, the Bear Movement has inspired an increasing number of organizations, events, publications, and resources around the United States (and expanding overseas via the Internet) dedicated to affirming and eroticizing large-bodied, hirsute gay men, known as Bears.



Pedro Veral, Mr. International Bear 2006, on the cover of *A Bear's Life*, one of several magazines serving the Bear community. Courtesy *A Bear's Life*.

Origins and Development

Bear culture has its origins in informal "chubby and chubby-chaser" networks among gay men in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Big men and their admirers played a role in the increasing diversification and specialization of identity-based gay organizations in the mid-1970s. The first chapter of Girth and Mirth, now an organization with chapters in cities worldwide, was founded in 1976. The Bear phenomenon may rightly be seen as an outgrowth of this organization as well as the informal friendship and sex networks that inspired it.

Bears, properly speaking, made their debut in the gay male collective consciousness with the appearance of specialty erotic magazines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Bear* magazine was the first to utilize the name. Like other specialty erotic publications of the period, *Bear* had its origins as a small-format, photocopied fanzine, which was later transformed into a full-sized glossy magazine produced by the commercial San Francisco pornography outlet, Brush Creek Media.

Other early resources for forging Bear identity were electronic bulletin boards, notably the Bear Mailing List. Like fanzines with technological enhancements, these were a way of exchanging pictures and stories as well as finding like-minded persons.

The first Bear organizations were founded in the early to mid-1990s; some began to host annual events, creating a "Bear circuit" of weekend gatherings and parties that draw men from across North America.

The Lone Star Saloon, founded in San Francisco in 1989, was possibly Bear culture's first formally sanctioned public site: a specialty bar that catered to Bears and that has subsequently become a site of pilgrimage for men around the world.

In other places, Bears have frequently shared public space with the gay male leather community. Leather bars frequently host weekly Bear nights or events, and there is a good deal of crossover membership between Bear and leather/kink communities, very likely due in part to the premium that both communities place on the cultivation of a masculine aesthetic and ethic. Bear Pride, held annually in Chicago on Memorial Day weekend (coinciding fortuitously with International Mister Leather, another yearly event), is another way in which Bear culture has built upon the foundation of leather culture while simultaneously creating a space for itself.

Reasons for the Rise of Bear Culture

Bears have themselves interpreted the meteoric ascendancy of Bear culture in multiple ways. First and foremost, Bear culture is perceived as a way of broadening gay male public discourse to include (erotic) representations of large, hairy men, especially important at a time when that discourse has threatened to narrow to exclude all but ephebic and hairless, muscled bodies as desirable to the gay male gaze.

For some, cultivating and celebrating Bearish bodies is a way of cultivating and celebrating a masculinity understood to be "authentic." Though Bears are typically middle-class in their origins, Bear pornography and public self-presentation draw strongly on the perceived aesthetic sensibilities and behaviors of rural and working-class (usually white, presumably heterosexual) men. In American society, embracing this particular body type for many men also means embracing other attributes and values of a particular social class that is often not their own. These attributes and values are nonetheless seen as being inherently and therefore "authentically" masculine, antithetical to the effeminacy traditionally ascribed to gay men.

Similarly, other Bears have drawn upon the symbolism of their ursine namesake as a "totem" or "spirit animal," appropriating religious motifs that, again, are the province of other cultures, notably Native American traditions. Some Bears, however, have argued that the uncritical emulation of such attributes does symbolic violence to members of the cultures that Bear culture has, in effect, fetishized.

Critiques of Bear Culture

Because of the premium placed by at least some of its members on authentic masculinity, Bear culture has been accused (most often by its own participants) of being as parochial and exclusionary as the mainstream gay culture that Bears frequently understand themselves excluded from because of their body type and their social and sexual interests. The question of "who gets to be a Bear" has dogged a community that has *de facto* excluded both men of color and the transgendered, as more and more of these individuals claim a Bear identity and seek membership in the community.

Last but not least, the Bear phenomenon has been criticized for the role that commodification has played both in forming and sustaining Bear identities and Bear culture. Though Bear culture's beginnings were decidedly non-commercial, Bears were quickly transformed into a niche market for a particular genre of pornography. As with other subcultures, the Bear movement has spawned legions of franchises and merchandisers, who have framed the ideal Bear as an ideal consumer of sex, travel, and entertainment, as well as of T-shirts, caps, coffee mugs, and other novelties. Only time will tell if Bear culture will continue to deepen and broaden beyond this consumerism.

Despite these internal critiques and debates, Bear culture remains an important way of challenging monolithic notions of what it means to be a gay man as well as challenging body types, behaviors, and interests that gay men--or, for that matter, anyone--are supposed to find desirable. It has served to connect gay men with a shared set of particular desires to one another, and has thus done much to strengthen as well as diversify gay male identity and community.

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