

On The Fate of the NJ Black Bear

(thoughts on the proposed New Jersey Comprehensive Black Bear Management Plan)

The NJ Fish and Game Council (FGC), in complying with New Jersey Supreme Court request, has submitted a Comprehensive Black Bear Management Plan (BBMP) to the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). This plan calls for 5 years of extended duration bear hunting seasons by shotgun, rifle and bow as a prescription for black bear overpopulation. In the next few weeks NJDEP Commissioner Bradley Campbell will decide the fate of the New Jersey black bear. We offer some thoughts on this most important issue for the citizens and bears of New Jersey.

Although there has been only one bear hunt (2003) in the last 35 years in New Jersey, the FGC is asking for extended season hunts for the next 5 years in an effort to: 1/reduce the black bear population 2/reduce property and crop destruction by black bears and 3/ reduce the number of complaints about black bears.

The FGC plan should not be accepted because it is lacking too many critical pieces. Lacking is the absolute black bear population estimate required by the New Jersey Supreme Court. (How can reducing the population of bears be responsibly advocated without knowing the current number of bears?). Lacking is a recommendation for ongoing annual black bear population monitoring. (Such monitoring is important to ensure the continued health of the black bear population and would be especially important in the event of an adverse environment event, such as a prolonged drought). Lacking is the proof that the black bear is overpopulated in New Jersey. Lacking is the supporting data as proof that a sport hunt of black bear would reduce human-bear problem interactions and bear-related damage/complaints.

The BBMP wants to reduce populations to what the FGC considers an “ideal size” (0.4 bears per square mile) and in some areas (marked bear exclusion zones) to 0.0 bears. Lacking also in the BBMP is the scientific data to support the FGC argument for a reduction in the present New Jersey black bear population. Without such data, selecting the “ideal size” bear population would be arbitrary and without scientific validity. With its temperate climate and abundance of available wild vegetation, many New Jersey wild areas represent an ideal habitat for bears. Even at the highest black bear population estimates, current population does not approach biological carrying capacity. The BBMP argues, however, that it is not the biological carrying capacity (how many bears will the environment support) but rather the cultural carrying capacity (how many bears will people tolerate) that should determine the black bear population of New Jersey. We disagree with the use of cultural carrying capacity as a determinant for how high or low a bear population will be permitted, as cultural carrying capacity has no scientific validity, is arbitrary, and would be based primarily on legitimate or illegitimate citizen complaints and political motives. Underlying the concept of “cultural carrying capacity” is the mistaken beliefs that a higher bear population will result in more nuisance and damage complaints as well as the corollary belief that reducing the bear population will result in fewer nuisance and damage complaints. One of us, using data from New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Minnesota and Ontario, Canada, where bear are hunted annually,

has found no evidence to indicate that the hunting of black bear reduces the incidence of damage or nuisance complaint reports. In fact the evidence strongly suggests that if hunting has any effect, it is extremely small. Hunting does not target the so called “problem bears” that frequent human habitation. Most of the hunted bears are culled from wild areas and have little or no human contact. Data from the 2003 [NJ] Black Bear Season Legal Harvest Summary confirms that hunting does not target the so called “problem bears” as only 10 of the 328 bears killed (4%) were considered “nuisance” bears, while as many as 25% of the culled bears were “cubs of the year” (less than a year old) and still following their mothers. Although the evidence suggests that sport hunting will not reduce human-bear problem interactions, a non-lethal management program involving garbage control, aversive conditioning of bears and educating humans about bears have been shown to be effective in reducing human-bear problem interactions.

Data from the BBMP compiling black bear complaints from 1999-2004 demonstrate that the majority of complaints are either nuisance or food related. Bears are attracted to human food/garbage and leaving garbage available to bears invites bears and bear related damage and complaints. Garbage control has been shown to be the key to minimizing human-bear problem interactions. One of us, using data from Yellowstone, Yosemite and Great Smoky National Parks, as well as from the communities of Juneau (Alaska), Elliot Lake (Ontario, CA) and the Lake Tahoe Basin (Nevada) has found a strong direct correlation between implementation of a program related to "Don't feed the bears", and reducing nuisance complaints. One need look no further than Denville, New Jersey to see the beneficial effects of garbage control and other non-lethal methods to reduce human-bear conflict. Denville, a small town in heart of “bear country” and in the lakes district of northern New Jersey, has reduced its bear-related complaints from approximately 100 complaints per year to almost zero by strict enforcement of garbage control laws, using standard Searles aversive conditioning methods on bears, and teaching its citizens about bears. The success of Denville requires that animal control, the police and municipal authorities work together toward promoting the philosophy of living in harmony with (rather than at war with) bears. Other NJ communities in “bear country” can follow the example of Denville and begin its non-lethal bear management program by simply enforcing the New Jersey state ban on feeding bears (NJSA 23:2A-14).

New Jersey is blessed with a vibrant and healthy black bear population that poses little danger to life or property if properly managed. We hope and trust that, in evaluating the draft Comprehensive Black Bear Management Plan, Bradley Campbell (Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection), will concur that BBMP is primarily designed to serve the small constituency of hunters (less than 1% of the NJ electorate) who want a black bear trophy for wall or floor, and that the plan does not make the case for a NJ black bear hunt either now or in the near future. Without scientific justifications, a hunt seems barbaric and senseless. In this new millennium we should take a fresh look at how we manage our wildlife and our environment. We should use good science to promote healthy ecosystems that can be enjoyed by all. The Proposed Black Bear Management Plan is certainly not good for New Jersey black bears and does not serve the desires or needs of the good people of New Jersey.

Gordon B. Stull, V.M.D., President

Millennium Wildlife Sciences

e-mail: gordon.stull@wildlifesciences.org

Dr. Stull is a New Jersey veterinarian and has studied bears in NJ, Minnesota and Alaska and is currently testing a chemical sterilant on captive male black bears.

Edward A. Tavss, PhD

Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

e-mail: edtavss@aol.com

A copy of this author's study as cited in this document can be found at:

www.wildlifesciences.org