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Resolving conflicts between humans and the threatened Louisiana black bear

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The Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*) is one of 16 subspecies of American black bear. At the time of English settlement, this subspecies was abundant throughout Louisiana, the southern two-thirds of Mississippi, eastern Texas, and extreme southern Arkansas. By the 1950s, Louisiana black bears had been extirpated from most of their original range due to habitat destruction and fragmentation and overharvest by hunters (Leigh and Chamberlain 2008). It is believed that only about 100 black bears remained; existing in isolated, extremely rural areas of eastern Louisiana. Bears became so scarce during the 1960s that the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) initiated a restocking program using bears captured in Minnesota. The restoration program ultimately was unsuccessful. Small, isolated bear populations continued to hang onto existence, and, in 1992, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) listed the Louisiana black bear as threatened.

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Since the bear's federal listing many agencies, including FWS and LDWF, Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC), USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services (WS), Louisiana State University, and University of Tennessee have come together in their efforts to study, sustain, and restore bears to suitable habitat. Through combined efforts of these organizations, bear numbers have stabilized and are increasing. While no verifiable population estimates exist at present, biologists believe the total population to be between 600 and 800 bears. Of special importance to the turnaround was that managers recognized that successful restoration would require addressing individual human–bear conflicts in a timely and effective manner. In the early 1990s, WS became a team player with LDWF and BBCC to resolve these issues.

Resolving conflicts between humans and a threatened species can be difficult and extremely frustrating (Worthy and Foggin 2008). Louisiana's human–bear conflicts are, for the most part, not different from bear problems elsewhere. These problems include bears wandering into urban areas; destroying beehives, crops, and deer feeders; gnawing on wood structures; and, of course, "dumpster-diving." Because of the uniqueness of each conflict, however, WS and its partners have taken an integrated wildlife damage management approach that adapts a variety of different methods to the situation at hand. Methods commonly integrated into other wildlife damage management activities, such as relocation and lethal control, are not options when dealing with the Louisiana black bear because neither of these methods is particularly conducive to population restoration efforts. Instead, nonlethal methods, such as electrical fencing, eliminating food sources, and aversive conditioning using rubber ammunition and hazing by dogs have become the "go to" methods. Additionally, the use of bear-resistant garbage containers in rural communities has been implemented, eliminating many problems caused by exposing wandering bears to human garbage. Unfortunately, none of these methods is a panacea, and, as bear numbers increase, wildlife managers will have to rely on their creativity to develop methods that will be effective and acceptable to the public.

Not all problems have practical solutions. For example, with the exception of active harassment by humans, there is no economically feasible, nonlethal method for keeping bears out of corn and sugarcane fields. In many cases, conflict resolution can be more a function of people management rather than bear

management. In rural areas, where people are self-reliant and may feel that no practical conflict management options exist, bears may be killed out of frustration or fear. The presence of knowledgeable professionals who demonstrate respect and concern to the affected human may often be the key to increase human tolerance of a bear where none existed previously (Madison 2008).

Repatriation of bears into suitable habitat, which was begun by state wildlife agencies in Arkansas and Louisiana in 2000 and 2001, has also resulted in conflicts between humans and released bears. Successful introduction of bears by moving adult female bears with newborn cubs depends on females being anchored to a new home range by her young. In most cases, repatriated bears stay in the designated areas; however, there are exceptions, including females that lose or abandon their young and those that leave for more favorable locations. Such long-distance movements often create stressful human–bear conflicts simply because bears show up in unusual places.

We are now historically at a point where 1 or more generations of people who live within what was once the range of the subspecies have been raised in a bear-free environment. Consequently, people in urban communities commonly are surprised to learn that bears exist in their area, until a bear ends up in a tree near their house. In such cases, people become shocked and terrified of bears (Brown and Conover 2008, Wolfe 2008). Although not a single human injury has been caused by the Louisiana black bear in modern history, the most common complaint received by wildlife professionals relates to human safety. Even when a bear is causing property damage and not human injury, the reason for requests for assistance usually is concern for human safety and well-being. Thus, because the mere sighting of a bear often is supercharged with emotion, the wildlife manager must consider the incident a human–wildlife conflict that must be addressed. In such cases, crowd control and interaction with the media become an integral part of conflict resolution. Such skills often are not taught in school but are learned through experience.

The reestablishment of the Louisiana black bear has posed numerous challenges, but the effort is succeeding, due, in part, to rapid and effective responses to complaints by agencies and organizations involved in bear recovery. As bear numbers increase, so will the number of conflicts. It is, therefore, imperative that conflicts continue to be addressed in such a way that public perception of bears remains positive. WS and its partners strive to make the Louisiana black bear "a hope for the future and not a remembrance of the past." If our descendents are going to have opportunities to experience bears in natural environments, we need to resolve today's human–bear conflicts.✷

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