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# Why are so many people attacked by predators?

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## *Editor's Introduction*

### Why are so many people attacked by predators?

**PREDATOR ATTACKS** on humans have proliferated during the last few decades. This is especially true for attacks by large species of predators, including black bears, grizzly bears, polar bears, cougars, wolves, alligators, and sharks (Conover 2002). What is causing so many different predators to sink their teeth into people these days?

Some media accounts blame the attacks on human folly. These accounts emphasize that people are attacked when they approach too close to a predator or try to feed one by hand. These explanations, which are usually untrue, are repeated because they are reassuring. It is comforting to think that we will not be the victim of a predator attack in the future because we would not make such a stupid mistake as feeding one. Attacks are more terrifying if they occur at random and can claim anyone—even (perish the thought) someone just like ourselves.

Another slightly modified explanation for predator attacks that I often observed in the media is that these attacks occur because predators are mad at humans for encroaching into their world or that humans have left the predators no choice by depriving them of their natural food. In other words, humans are once again to blame for predator attacks, but this time the responsibility is societal rather than individual.

In actuality, nobody (either human or predator) is responsible for predator attacks, and nothing is gained by trying to identify which party is the culprit (Wolfe 2008). The truth is much more complex, and the problem of human–predator conflicts much more intractable. There are multiple reasons why wildlife attacks on humans are increasing in frequency. First, human populations are increasing, especially in exurban areas (Storm et al. 2007), leaving an ever decreasing amount of wild areas. Second, people spend more time recreating in the outdoors. With more predators and people sharing the same land, contacts between humans and predators are becoming

more frequent, and a certain (but small) proportion of these contacts results in people being injured. Third, predator populations are expanding. A century ago, our ancestors tried to



Michael R. CONOVER (Photo by Davis Archibald)

eradicate predators and took every opportunity to shoot, poison, or trap them. For the most part, this effort was successful; predator numbers plunged. When I was a boy growing up in Florida during the 1950s, alligators were endangered, and I never saw one outside of a zoo or Everglades National Park. Today, alligators are abundant throughout the state. With a change in wildlife laws and attitudes towards predators in recent years, populations of black bears, grizzly bears, cougars, coyotes, and wolves are all much higher than they once were.

Another important change involves the behavior of large predators. A century ago when people shot predators on sight, predators were very wary of humans. They avoided areas where they might come into contact with humans and fled as soon as a human was spotted. Many predators have now learned that humans make good neighbors. We inadvertently provide food for predators, usually in the form of hand-outs, garbage, pet food, and sometimes even our pets. Some predators have moved into suburban areas in pursuit of the herbivores, such as deer and Canada geese, that now call our backyards

home (Holevinski et al. 2007, Ng et al. 2008). Indeed, more black bears are found in suburban parts of the Sierra Nevada Mountains than in the more remote parts (Beckmann et al. 2008).

The bottom line is that as long as humans and predators co-exist in North America, some people will be injured or killed by these animals. This is not to say that predator populations should be reduced. We humans benefit in many ways from having these predators share our environment (Conover 2002). But measures can be taken to reduce the number of people injured by predators. Such can be achieved by obtaining a greater understanding of predator behavior (Thiemmann et al. 2008), human behavior (Brown and Conover 2008), and the factors that contribute to the successful management of predator–human conflicts (Cotton 2008, Zieglerstrum 2008).

Humans are not the only victims of predator attacks. After attacks occur, predators also are killed, and people’s attitudes towards these animals harden (Lemelin 2008, Worthy and Foggin 2008). Consequently, both humans and predators suffer from these human–wildlife conflicts. The articles in this issue of *Human–Wildlife Conflicts* provide information that will help reduce conflicts between humans and predators, particularly bears. \*

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