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Impacts of the cancellation of the spring bear hunt in Ontario, Canada

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APPROXIMATELY 10 MILLION people and 100,000 black bears (*Ursus americanus*) live in Ontario, Canada. The highest concentration of black bears (0.4–0.6 bears/100 km²) is in northern Ontario (Bear Wise 2004). While this area is sparsely populated by humans, it is the site where human–bear conflicts are common for several reasons. These include people spending time in formerly inaccessible areas via forestry roads and off-road vehicle trails, changing recreational patterns, and a growing black bear population (Conover 2008, Madison 2008). Among residents of northern Ontario (hereafter referred to as northerners), no other wildlife management issue has dominated the political discussion more than the 1999 moratorium on the spring black bear hunt (MSBBH).

North-south regional disparities resonate in hinterland regions like northern Ontario. Most people who live in Ontario reside in the southern part of the province where there are few bears. The MSBBH was supported by southerners, but it was opposed by people in northern Ontario (Sopuck 2007). Opposition to the spring bear hunt began during 1998, when the Shad Foundation and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) spearheaded a campaign to end the spring bear hunt in Ontario. The IFAW campaign argued that it was inhumane to kill bears during the spring bear hunt because it resulted in a population of orphaned bear cubs (Dunk 2002). This argument resonated with the citizens in southern Ontario (hereafter called southerners).

Few bears are found in southern Ontario, and southerners' perception is that bears are a scarce resource and that they should not be killed. While the proposal to end the spring bear hunt was strongly opposed by northerners,

the views of the more numerous southerners prevailed. Hence, Ontario's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act was modified during 1999, and the spring bear hunt was terminated (Dunk 2002). The decision to end the spring bear hunt, however, angered many northerners who felt that their voice should have prevailed because they are the ones who would be more impacted by the MSBBH. Many northerners believed that the MSBBH's passage had little to do with wildlife management because black bears are not endangered, but had everything to do with politics (Quinney 2004; Sopuk 2007).



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Some of the most vocal opponents of the MSBBH were the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), the Canadian Outdoor Heritage Alliance, Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters, and the Northwestern Sportsmen's Alliance (NOSA). According to OFAH, the immediate result of the MSBBH for northern Ontario communities was a 48% decrease of nonresident bear-hunting permits, and, consequently, a 33% decrease, or \$44 million, in expenditures by hunters (Quinney 2004). In addition, the MSBBH produced the perception among northerners that bears now posed a greater risk to their safety and property. Further, northern hunters were alienated by the MSBBH because they believed that bears were responsible for increased predation on moose (*Alces americanus*) calves, thus competing with them for moose and other big game species. This perception was particularly strong in areas where bears were legally protected (Thirgood et al. 2000, Redpath et al. 2004). Hunters in these areas also believed that the MSBBH is a mistake.

In response to growing concerns regarding black bear–human conflicts, the Ontario

Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) commissioned the Nuisance Bear Review Committee (NBRC) during 2003 to examine black bear–human interactions throughout Ontario. To some residents, the increasing human–bear interactions have resulted directly from the MSBBH. Yet, while the NBRC did not find “any connection between the cancellation of the spring bear hunt and recent increases in nuisance [bear] activity,” it did recommend that “a limited spring black bear hunt be re-instated for socioeconomic reasons, but under strict conditions” (Poulin et al. 2003). This suggestion was never acted upon, and the MSBBH continues today. However, in 2004 OMNR did follow the NBRC’s recommendation and implemented the Bear Wise program, a public awareness and public relations initiative. It was hoped that this program would reduce problems caused by bears through an approach based on education and prevention (websites, fact sheets, posters) and a rapid response by government employees to bear problems (Bear Wise 2004).

Nevertheless, discontent over the NBRC and the Bear Wise program has increased in recent years (Bear Wise 2004, 2006). To some, the approach of the Bear Wise program was ill-conceived, diverting funds from more important and pressing issues involving the management of wildlife. Moreover, when bears attacked 4 people in northern Ontario during 2006 and 2007, the local discontent against Bear Wise was reinforced.

The conflicting interests of northerners and southerners has contributed to a resistance movement involving political maneuvering, petitioning, poaching, vigilantism, mockery, and legal challenges to MSBBH. For example, northern Ontario mayors called on the provincial government to protect citizens from black bears (Bear Wise 2006). The resistance movement, often veiled under the concept of “northern sovereignty,” has, thus, created mistrust of the management agency and disaffection with current management strategies.

The challenge for the OMNR that is struggling to meet its mandate of wildlife management, is to try to understand the complex interactions between bears and humans while attempting to remain credible in the eyes of northerners. People living in northern Ontario are not the

only victims of the MSBBH. Given the high rates of poaching and revenge killing of bears in Ontario, the black bear can also be viewed as a victim of well-meaning but short-sighted proponents of the MSBBH who did not give enough thought to its long-term ramifications.

Path for the future

Disillusionment with black bear management in Ontario and the general failure of the OMNR to address these concerns has left many people in northern Ontario questioning the ability of the OMNR to manage wildlife in the province. The results have been the implementation of various resistance and noncompliance strategies. The Bear Wise program has also been a victim of this resistance movement, and many people oppose it because it was created in response to the MSBBH.

What is now needed is greater visibility in the local media of successful bear–human conflict prevention projects that are funded by the Bear Wise program. In addition, Bear Wise and the OMNR should work in close conjunction with cities, municipalities, and First Nations to implement laws to prohibit both the intentional and unintentional feeding of bears (Peine 2001). These strategies, combined with the reintroduction of a limited spring bear hunt, may alleviate some of the perceived black bear–human conflicts (Cotton 2008). Although people’s perceptions may be inaccurate, their opinions are nevertheless important. Unless the benefits from the conservation of wildlife are obvious to people, there will be little incentive to manage natural resources sustainably (Newsome et al. 2005, Worthy and Foggin 2008).

As we welcome a new head of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, it would be wise for Ontario’s residents, both northern and southern, to examine all the facts objectively and provide the minister with their reasoned points of view on this issue. I, for one, believe that a limited spring bear hunt would help protect black bears in Ontario. Finally, I hope the new OMNR minister will adopt a more inclusive and more transparent approach when making wildlife management policies. *

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