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The Soap Box

Expanding bear populations bring new challenges to state wildlife agencies

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In the 1800s, bears were almost eliminated from the United States because they were seen as a threat to humans and livestock and were labeled pests. Now, bear populations are growing and becoming more widely dispersed. Their numbers are increasing and continually extending into new territories, including suburban areas. Suburban developments also are expanding into already established bear territory. This helps to explain that while state wildlife agencies estimate bear populations have increased 12% nationally during the past 5 years, bear complaints have increased 19%, personnel-hours to resolve complaints have increased 22%, and state agency expenditures to control bear damage have increased 40% (Figure 1).

The Northeast region of the United States has experienced the fastest increase in bear populations with a 31% growth rate. As a result, complaints have increased 36%, and personnel-hours and expenditures have increased 63% and 56% respectively. If hunting and trapping were eliminated, northeastern states estimate the bear population could increase an additional 166%.

In 2003, William Siemer and Daniel Decker from Cornell University conducted a survey of people with an interest in or concern about black bears and people who can affect or are affected by the black bear management program. The survey was conducted to help the Bureau of Wildlife in New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation develop a black bear management plan. In all geographic areas, 80% of respondents agreed with the statement, "I enjoy having black bears in New York State." However, about a third of respondents in each geographic area also agreed with the statement, "I worry about problems that bears may cause."

Today, wildlife managers work with residents in bear country to help them understand how to live with bears, and in many areas conflicts have been reduced. Education does help individuals to become more comfortable living with bears, but a certain amount of conflict is still going to occur. During times of increased bear populations and/or decrease in the availability of natural foods, the likelihood of human–bear conflicts increases substantially. Human–bear conflicts are also likely to occur when bears become conditioned to food sources, such as garbage, bird seed in feeders, and dog food. Occasionally, direct contact with bears can result in physical harm and even death to humans.

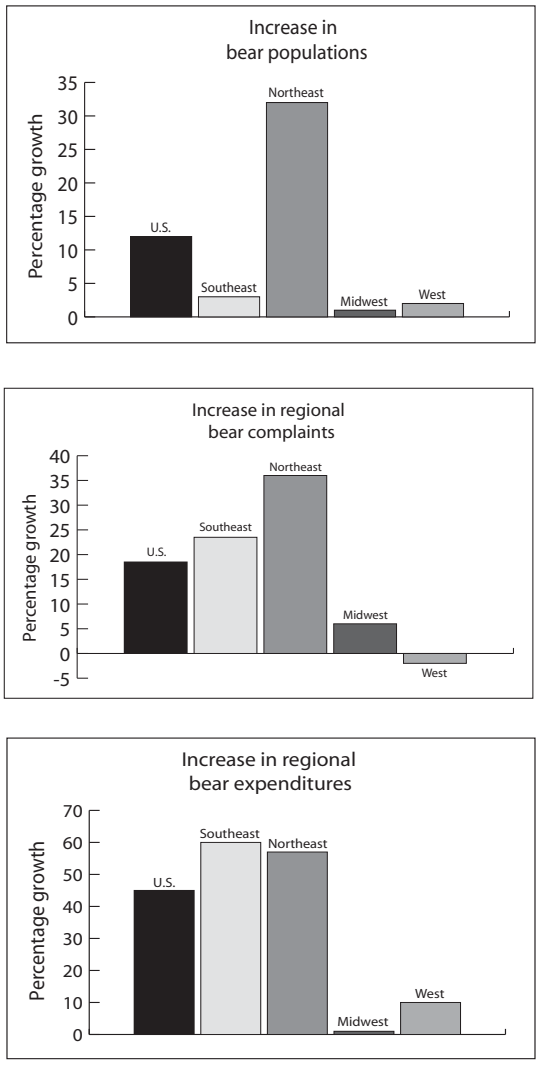

Figure 1. Estimated changes during the last 5 years in regional bear populations, bear complaints, and costs to state wildlife agencies to deal with them.

Typical residential complaints include destruction of bird feeders, consumption of pet foods, raiding and damaging of trash containers and dumpsters, digging in compost piles, breaking into sheds and outdoor structures, damaging grease-stained grills and barbecues, and begging food from backyard picnickers. Occasionally, people report that bears have entered their homes.

Bears can cause a wide range of economic damage, including the following:

- Bears can have an impact on timber production. They feed on trees by removing the bark with their claws and teeth, scraping the sapwood from the heartwood. A tree of any age is vulnerable, and a single bear may peel bark from as many as 70 trees a day. Such damage often kills the tree and can be so extensive that a timber stand is destroyed.
- Black bears find artificial beehives a treat and eat the honey, wax, and bee larvae. Beehive damage from bears is substantial in many areas of the United States and Canada, and losses have exceeded $200,000 annually in some states and provinces.
- Black bears cause agricultural damage, particularly to corn crops. Bears not only consume the corn, but also flatten the stalks, hindering mechanical harvesting.
- Bears kill various livestock, including sheep, goats, swine, cattle, rabbits, turkeys, and chickens.

To slow the growth of bear populations and reduce conflicts, over half of all states have established regulated bear hunting seasons. Other states, whose bear populations are close to reaching the cultural carrying capacity (the limit that human populations are willing to accept), are beginning to put bear hunting seasons in their plans. The primary goal is to keep bear populations healthy, yet keep their populations within cultural tolerance limits. Wildlife managers do not want bears to become pests. Therefore, managers need to be able to use all potential tools for controlling bear populations, hunting being one of the most important.

New Jersey, which is the most densely populated state in the nation, has a growing density of bears. The combination of high human and high bear density has created a major public debate. Increasing human development in rural northwestern counties of New Jersey, the coincident increase of bear populations within these counties, and resulting expansion of bears south and east have resulted in an increase in bear–human conflicts.

Although black bears occurred statewide in New Jersey through the 1800s, the state's bear population was less than a 100 during the mid-1900s. Since 1953, the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and the Fish and Game Council have managed black bear as a game animal. Game animal status protected bears from indiscriminate killing, which stabilized their population. Limited hunting was legal in 10 seasons from 1958 to 1970. Based upon data gathered through regulated hunting seasons, New Jersey authorities assessed the status of the bear population and closed bear-hunting season in 1971. Since the 1980s, the black bear population has increased, and its range has expanded due to the protection afforded them by a closed season, bear population increases in adjacent states (Pennsylvania and New York), and improved habitat from the maturation of forested areas (increased food supplies).

The 1997 black bear management plan recognized that cultural carrying capacity had been reached in northern New Jersey and that the bear population was large enough to sustain a limited, regulated hunting season. However, in response to a lawsuit, New Jersey governor Christine Todd Whitman suspended the hunt.

Since then, complaints about bears to DFW have increased, and estimates of bear damage in the state exceed $100,000 annually. Additionally, several people have been injured by bears in recent years. In response, New Jersey's Fish and Game Council decided to conduct a bear hunt in 2003, the first in over 30 years. Bear hunting was limited to a selected area of New Jersey where the population of black bears was estimated to be 1,777 adults. Prior to the season, 7 lawsuits regarding the hunt were filed, but all lawsuits were decided in favor of allowing bear hunting season to proceed. Although opponents to the bear hunting season speculated that the bear hunt would create trespass and safety problems, no specific landowner complaints involving bear hunters, and no hunter accidents were reported. The hunt successfully established that hunters could safely harvest bears in a controlled manner; 328 bears were harvested that year. ❇