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Misconceptions hamper protection of bears

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The Director's desk

Misconceptions hamper protection of bears

BRUCE D. LEOPOLD, Co-Director, Jack H. Berryman Institute (East), Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University, Box 9690, Mississippi State, MS 39762, USA

WHEN DR. CONOVER notified me of the special topic for this issue of *Human-Wildlife Conflicts*, I was excited. Dr. Conover has a talent for selecting relevant topics that reflect pressing issues in our field! The last issue of *HWC* focused on deer-human conflicts, a topic that is very important to Mississippi and the eastern United States.

It is common knowledge that bears are established in states neighboring Mississippi. Remarkably, however, bears also are on the increase in Mississippi. We have conducted considerable research on our few Mississippi bears, and 2 years ago we confirmed the birth of bear cubs. However, emotions are quite high about our growing bear population. Mississippi already had problems with bears destroying honey-bee hives and individual bears eating a quarter acre of corn per day. Further, in a general survey, we found that 8% of Mississippians believe that their state not only has black bears, but also grizzly bears. Considering the stigma grizzlies have, this perception complicates our efforts to convince people that we should allow our bear population to grow. Adding to the problem is that our bears often are mistaken for feral hogs, which are hunted intensely in some areas. In the Southeast, we have many challenges regarding management of black bears. The challenges involve educating the public, as well as ensuring that bears have adequate habitat and protection. This issue of *Human-Wildlife Conflicts*, therefore, could not have come at a better time to address these issues.

As for the Berryman Institute (BI), thanks to Bill Clay and his staff we have weathered the funding issues of last year. For this year, we received nearly full funding. Although we received a cut, this will not impair our outreach

and educational activities. It will, however, reduce our research funding. By the time you read this column, BI East will have closed its website to new proposal submissions, and the Panel will be scoring the proposals already received.

One very exciting initiative that BI-East has started is an internship program with scientists of the National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) and its field stations. We are providing internships for 8 undergraduate students in the United States to get summer field and laboratory experience with NWRC

research biologists. (At the time of writing this column, 32 students have applied for the internships!) This is a new program that will continue to promote the mission of the Berryman Institute by providing opportunities for undergraduates to gain experience conducting research in human-wildlife conflicts. We hope that the research experience will lead participants in the program into a career in wildlife damage management, hopefully with USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services. Lastly, I wish Dr. Rick Bruggers the very best during his retirement and congratulate Dr. Larry Clark who will take the reins from Rick as director of the NWRC. Good luck to both of you! *



Bruce D. Leopold