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"Making good conservation good business"



New Jersey B.E.A.R. Group's June 2010 interview with

WildWatch's President, Dr. Stephen Stringham about

REDUCING NUISANCE ACTIVITY BY BLACK BEARS

Q. Dr. Stringham, is it true that you have been studying bears and bear human coexistence for approximately 4 decades?

A. Yes, grizzly/brown bears in Alaska and Montana, black bears in California, Alaska, Montana, New York and Vermont.

Q. And you've written several books on bear human coexistence?

A. Yes, 4 published, 3 more nearing completion.

Q. Isn't that more books than anyone else in history has written about bears?

A. I believe so.

Q. And you've also produced technical scientific reports?

A. Numerous technical papers published in scientific journals or for private consulting clients. I've testified as an expert witness before the Environmental Board and Public Utilities Board in Vermont, in Federal Court in Montana, and before Congressional subcommittees in Montana and Alaska.

Q. Is recreational hunting of bears the best way to minimize their nuisance behavior?

A. No.

1. Killing bears should be a last resort, and it should target only those nuisance bears that cannot be cured, even after people have quit luring bears into misbehaving. Once attractants are eliminated, and intrusions into human habitats are punished (e.g., with pepper spray), virtually every bear will quit raiding. Bears don't deserve capital punishment for problems that people create.
2. Recreational hunting seldom identify or eliminate problem bears.
3. All too often, recreational hunting is both inefficient and counterproductive.
4. Killing bears treats only the symptoms, not the causes of misbehavior.

Q. What IS the best way to minimize bear nuisance behavior?

A. An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. Every minute and ever penny invested making sure that bears never start misbehaving saves days and dollars curing misbehavior. Prevention is best promoted through education and enforcement of laws that prohibit feeding bears. Nearly all misbehavior starts when bears are attracted to human-source foods, especially garbage, but secondarily pet foods, bird feed, picnic lunches, coolers full of fish, gardens, orchards or livestock. Misbehavior consists of bears eating things we don't want them to eat, or damaging our property in order to get such foods. It is peoples' responsibility to not start bears expecting food in human habitats. Laws are put in place for this reason.

Bears pay attention to what other bears eat. Once they realize one of their peers has found a new food source, they may back track that peer to the new source. Misbehavior by one bear can spread to misbehavior by many bears. Only educated and responsible people and communities can prevent and stop this cycle.

Odors from human-source foods must be minimized and physical access to the edibles eliminated. Bears soon lose interest and forage for food elsewhere, preferably away from people.

Q. Once a bear begins habitually consuming human-source foods – once it becomes food-conditioned – does cutting off familiar sources stop its misbehavior?

A. A food-conditioned bear will move on down the road and raid other homes, gardens or orchards. This is why preventing depredations requires not just a few bear smart people but a BEAR SMART COMMUNITY. Other food sources that exist in human habitat have to be eliminated so that bears understand that human habitats are NOT sources of food. If a bear does move on to new human-sources, breaking its bad habit requires aversive conditioning.

Q. What is aversive conditioning?

A. It's teaching bears that seeking food from human sources is both futile and unpleasant. They get no food and the attempt is punished.

Q. How effective is aversive conditioning?

A. Done correctly, it can be highly effective. Bears are smart. If there is no food reward and searching for it is an unpleasant experience, they have no incentive to return.

This works, of course, only if bears are no longer being attracted to people's homes or to other human-source edibles. Otherwise, punishment may simply force bears to delay raids until people aren't present, for instance at night, which is an improvement as they want to avoid people.

The basic skills of aversive conditioning can quickly be learned by novices – even by typical families living in bear country. The important thing is teaching a bear is that there is NOTHING here for him and he will have a negative experience; human habitats are not parts of his territory.

Q. Do government agencies use aversive conditioning?

A. Both state and federal agencies have historically relied mostly on alternative means, especially keeping bears away from humans and human-source foods. Few state or federal agencies have invested as much time or money in aversive conditioning.

Use of aversive conditioning has been most highly developed by private citizen groups who value live bears. Foremost among these groups are businesses like the Wind River Bear Institute, or volunteer organizations such as the Tahoe Bear League, the Bear Smart Society, the BEAR Group in New Jersey, and the Bear Viewing Association. They are highly effective where bears aren't allowed access to garbage or other human-source attractants.

Q. You've said that minimizing attractants and aversive conditioning are the most efficient and effective ways to reduce nuisance behavior by bears. But what about the claim that the same goal can be achieved by simply by reducing size of the bear population?

A. That has been a prevailing myth. Before bears colonize an area, there are no bear problems. As bear numbers increase, problems begin and then escalate. People see the relationship: more bears, more bear problems. So they expect the reverse to also be true: fewer bears, fewer problems. But Nature isn't that simple. Once bears have learned about sources of attractive edibles such as garbage and pet food, or garden crops and orchards, this knowledge spreads across the population. So even if the population is reduced, the knowledge remains and will be exploited so long as attractive human-source foods remain accessible. Even removing a large percentage of a local bear population wouldn't necessarily produce a long-term reduction in nuisance behaviors.

Q. If knowledge of human-source attractants is widespread in a bear population, why don't all the bears become bandits?

A. Several reasons.

1st In many areas like NJ, black bears are territorial. Although a female may share her home range with close female kin, she is likely to exclude other females. High-ranking males may also exclude lower ranking males. So bears living close to human communities or campgrounds discourage intruders. This limits the number of potential nuisance bears.

2nd Many bears, like many people, fear the unknown. They avoid people, houses, cars, and other strange things. This reduces their exposure to human-source attractants and counteracts some degree of attraction.

3rd Xenophobia toward people, houses, cars, etc. is seldom overcome unless human-source foods become so attractive that local bears risk foraging on them, then learn that their raids aren't punished. Bears which haven't had this experience remain xenophobic.

Q. What about selectively removing bears which have lost their xenophobia?

A. Obviously, all nuisance bears have lost some degree of xenophobia. However, even bears with no distrust of people don't necessarily become nuisances. And some former nuisance bears have learned to stop misbehaving. If a resident bear isn't causing problems, leaving it there reduces likelihood that it's place will be taken by a bear that hasn't learned how to peacefully coexist with people.

Q. What about removing the specific bears that cause most nuisance problems?

Although removing a nuisance bear may result in a brief reduction in bear visits to homes with unsecured garbage or other attractants, so long those attractants remain accessible, other bears will eventually arrive in search of edibles, especially when natural foods are scarce.

Q. Doesn't hunting bears make them shyer of people and thus more likely to avoid people and their homes?

A. Bears shot by hunters usually die too soon to learn anything useful from the experience. Bears which escape from hunters without being shot learn more from being stalked than they do from being shot at. But bears learn equally well when they are stalked by photographers or anyone else, whether or not the person carries a gun.

You might argue, of course, that hunting removes the boldest, most aggressive bears, and thus reduces their abundance and prevalence of the genes that make them especially bold and aggressive. However, this is pure speculation, since no one has ever measured relative boldness or aggressiveness of individual bears in a population, then compared the proportions of bold, aggressive bears in the population vs. in the harvest. Furthermore, there is no evidence that differences among individual bears in boldness or aggressiveness are strongly linked to genetic differences.

Q. How does sport hunting affect the tiny risk of someone being hurt by a bear?

A. Sport hunting may increase risk of someone being shot by accident. But I know of no evidence that it reduces risk of someone being injured by a bear.

Q. Then what justification is there for sport hunting?

A.

1st It's a form of recreation that many people enjoy. They enjoy the activity of hunting, and they enjoy bragging rights for having killed an animal that the public thinks is very dangerous. People who know the truth, that most bears are really quite inoffensive, aren't as impressed by bear hunters. But the myth prevails, and hunters continue wanting bear trophies.

2nd Fees and taxes paid by hunters put money into the coffers of state game departments.

Q. Summarizing, what's the best way to minimize nuisance activities?

A.

- * Prevent bears from beginning the habit of getting human-source foods.
- * Store foods properly.
- * Surround your home or orchard or garden with an electric fence.
- * Learn how to deal with bear encounters (e.g., by reading my books). In particular, learn basic aversive conditioning techniques to teach bears that your property is off bounds to them.