



LOUISIANA BLACK BEAR IN THE CROSSHAIRS

This month, we're working hard to defend our official state mammal, the Louisiana black bear.

Sadly, it's estimated that the Louisiana black bear has lost 99% of its historic population of 80,000 bears and 97% of its 120,000 square mile range. By the 1950s, bear numbers had plummeted to just a few hundred animals, due to habitat loss and hunting. The species was in so much trouble that it was named a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1992. At the time of the listing, the Humane Society of Louisiana began working to save the threatened animals, raising awareness of the bear's plight and even creating a 'Save the Bear' license plate to raise funds for bear protection.

Unfortunately, the bear was controversially delisted by the USFWS in 2016, with groups including the Sierra Club suing in protest. The lawsuit maintained that the delisting was based on bad science and faulty reasoning. Specifically, it was alleged that the decision ignored the ongoing loss of bottomland forest and other critical habitat; it also minimized the impacts of human-related bear killings, including poaching incidents, automobile accidents and more. The suit also noted the dangers of cross hybridization of the animals with a non-native species,

which was previously introduced for hunting. Finally, the complaint maintained that the bear population size was overestimated; even if the estimates of 500-750 animals used by USFWS are taken at face value, the numbers are still inadequate for maintaining a healthy bear population. The suit was first dismissed in 2018 but refiled again in September of 2020.

We knew that if efforts to save the bear appeared to meet with success, state wildlife officials would eventually propose the reinstatement of a bear hunting season in Louisiana. Not surprisingly, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has sadly proposed a limited bear hunting season in 2024. The plan would establish a "lottery" in which hunters would seek the right to kill bears in the northeastern part of the state. We and other opponents of the hunt maintain that the population is too fragile to sustain hunting of any kind.

Some residents in the area of the proposed bear hunt have reported an increasing number of human and bear encounters. They believe that hunting will help to resolve these problems. On the contrary, there is sound evidence that hunting is likely counterproductive in such situations. A comprehensive study in Ontario, Canada, for example, showed that the best method for managing human and bear interactions is to properly manage attractants and teach coexistence.

Other data suggests that hunting is counterproductive. In Vermont, for example, it was shown that around half of all bears killed are female - undoubtedly many of them had cubs. Evidence suggests that the orphaned cubs of these mothers may actually become the 'nuisance' bears of concern to residents. Furthermore, it has been shown that programs like Florida's *BearWise* can successfully reduce conflicts between citizens and bears. Louisiana should follow the lead of communities working to avoid killing animals, when the population is so fragile.

Louisiana, the unfortunately-named *Sportsmen's Paradise*, has an extremely entrenched hunting culture, which is embraced and supported by virtually every state political leader and powerbroker. As such, it will always be an extremely uphill battle to advocate for any non-hunting perspective. However, even some pro-hunting advocates have disagreed with the idea of restoring a bear hunt in the state. Because of the unique and imperiled status of the Louisiana black bear, we must take a stand and do all we can to help the species continue to survive and eventually thrive. From circulating petitions and writing letters this month, to researching other options to protect the bear and to oppose the misguided hunt, the Humane Society of Louisiana will keep speaking out and taking action for our state's beloved black bear.

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