SOMETHING’S BRUIN

- Northern Harrier
- Black Sea Bass
- Bumblebees
During the early 1990s, New Hampshire's black bear management program was relatively new and changing rapidly. It had only been a few years since the State Legislature granted New Hampshire Fish and Game full regulatory authority for bears. In 1995, the state's bear population was an estimated 3,000 animals, 46% fewer than today's estimate of 5,300. The state's first bear management plan set goals allowing population growth and range expansion into suitable habitat, laying the foundation for a successful management program that would span two decades.

As the state's bear population grew, it was soon recognized that mitigating conflicts between bears and humans was a top priority. The size of a bear population depends largely on human attitudes toward bears. Even when bear densities were much lower, it was clearly understood that bear-human conflicts would occur as long as human-based food attractants were present and accessible in back yards.

Early efforts to reduce conflicts between people and wildlife came in the form of a Game Damage Adjustment Program, administered by Fish and Game's Wildlife Division, which helped affected landowners with damage payment assessments and prevention tools. A cooperative agreement between Fish and Game and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services followed in the fall of 1986, focusing on bear, deer, and moose. With additional funding and personnel, this agreement emphasized damage prevention more than compensation.
In 1996, a technical education offshoot of this program was established that was more bear-specific, aimed directly at informing the public about New Hampshire’s bears. This new program, “Something’s Bruin in New Hampshire – Learn to Live with Bears,” has become a 20-year comprehensive bear educational campaign and the cornerstone of the conflict mitigation program. This cooperative effort has served to educate the public on how to avoid conflicts, enhance public tolerance towards bears, promote the need for increased human responsibility in minimizing conflicts, and reduce the level of human-related food attractants on the landscape. Staff from both agencies provide technical assistance to many residents and tourists each year.

The cooperative conflict abatement program received a major boost in 2002 when it was able to hire additional field staff to address bear/human conflicts at the local level. In 2004, Senator Judd Gregg helped secure additional federal funding for USDA Wildlife Services in New Hampshire, allowing two full-time field technicians to be hired during the peak conflict months of May through August. These technicians provide timely and efficient complaint resolution that has been critical to increased public support and willingness to make changes.

New Hampshire’s bear technicians respond to an average of just over 600 bear complaints each year. The majority (78%) of annual conflicts relate to bears causing property damage (raids on bird feeders and garbage cans) or to concerns over public safety when bears enter human-occupied areas. Agricultural-related complaints have

Since 2006, it has been illegal to feed black bears in New Hampshire, either intentionally or not (Fis 310.01). Feeding is detrimental to bears and might result in injury to a person, damage to property or create a public nuisance. Bears are easily habituated with food, and feeding causes them to become comfortable in human environments. Teaching bears to approach people and houses for food is ill-advised and often results in bears being killed due to chronic nuisance activity.
New Hampshire’s bear population has grown from 3,000 to an estimated 5,300 over the last two decades. Growth was more rapid from 1995-2004, increasing approximately 6.4% per year. The pace of annual growth slowed to about 2.2% after 2005.

From 1995-2004, annual bear/human conflicts increased about 8% per year. During the most recent decade (2005-2014) complaints have stabilized and remained consistent with previous levels. Technicians respond to just over 600 bear complaints in an average year. In years when complaints reach unnaturally high levels (e.g., 2003 and 2012), drought conditions caused widespread mast failures. When natural foods are absent in the woods, bears supplement with human-related foods, thereby increasing complaints.

How to Measure Success

Quantifying success of any conflict abatement program is challenging. A qualitative assessment is not much easier, as “success” is based on a person’s value system. People who have tolerance towards wildlife tend to expect and accommodate some level of conflicts between bears and people. For those who lack such tolerance, one conflict is too many.

Based on quantifiable data, all indications suggest that the abatement program has had a positive influence on conflict trends. A cross portions of the U.S. and Canada where black bears exist, management agencies report an increasing trend in bear-human conflicts. In New Hampshire, incidents have stabilized during the past decade.

Given the growth seen in both human and bear populations over this time period, stabilization matches my definition of success. The state’s human population grew 20% from 1990-2013, and the bear population grew as well (see chart). Both of these variables remained low and stable.

Technician Nancy Comeau is now in her 12th season teaching people how to coexist with New Hampshire’s black bears. “I have definitely seen a decrease in complaints in areas we visit regularly,” said Comeau. “Bears are going to be bears. People need to recognize what attractants may be inviting bears into their yards and take responsibility to remove them or make them inaccessible to bears. We can help with that.”

In addition to technical assistance and educational messaging from the Something’s Bruin program, this cooperative effort loans conflict mitigation equipment such as electric fences, bear-proof garbage containers, etc., to the public to demonstrate successful techniques for deterring bears by securing residential food attractants.

Another key partner, the U.S. Forest Service, has carried the torch on educating campers to avoid conflicts with bears on White Mountain National Forest lands.
have a significant impact on conflict frequency, so the “no net gain” over the past decade suggests we’re making real progress in teaching people how to manage food attractants and minimize conflicts with bears.

**Moving Forward**

Our success leaves no room to be less diligent. We will never completely eliminate bear-human interactions as long as we have people, bears and human-based food attractants. However, we can strive to keep them at a reasonable level. Nearly half of annual complaints are directly related to bird feeders and unsecured garbage. If all bird feeders were taken down by April 1 and all garbage was stored to prevent bear access, annual complaints could be cut in half. Additionally, if all chicken pens were secured with electric fencing and people stopped intentionally feeding bears, bear-human conflicts might become minimal in New Hampshire.

A large percentage of residents and visitors to New Hampshire should be commended for their willingness to become educated about bears, for modifying their behavior so as to prevent conflicts and for becoming more responsible stewards of the state’s wildlife. Hopefully the future will continue to bring more positive outcomes – for bears and humans.

Andrew Timmins is the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department’s Bear Project Leader.
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