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May 13, 2014**Bear and Human Conflicts – A Need for Change***By Andrew Timmins, N.H. Fish and Game Bear Biologist*

It seems that people in New Hampshire may not be taking the old adage "A Fed Bear Is a Dead Bear" seriously enough these days. Recent events across the state involving the feeding of bears show a trend that has serious consequences for both communities and bears.

In 2006, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department established a rule (FIS 310.01) that prohibits a person from feeding bears, either intentionally or inadvertently, given that doing so causes nuisance situations, results in property damage and can become a human safety concern. Not directly mentioned in the rule language, but of equal importance, is the fact that feeding bears habituates bears to humans and essentially eliminates, or severely alters, the natural behavior and foraging patterns of bears.



Since 2006, Fish and Game has addressed a number of intentional bear feeding sites around the state, at some of which people had been feeding bears for over 20 years. Collectively, staff from the U.S. Department of Agriculture - Wildlife Services, Fish and Game Wildlife Biologists and Conservation Officers have worked hard to identify intentional feeding sites and try to help people who are feeding to understand the serious consequences of this practice. Some have been cooperative, others, less so. People who are feeding bears are initially asked to stop via a formal warning. If they fail to stop, they are then in violation of FIS 310.01 and may be issued a summons. In many instances, a formal warning, coupled with education, has been effective. This year, however, this sensible approach doesn't seem to be working as well.

A Troubling Trend

During the first week of May, Fish and Game discovered four historical feeding sites in New Hampshire where intentional bear feeding has resumed, despite previous formal warnings being issued. One site in particular, located on West Side Road in North Conway, has been particularly challenging for bear managers. In the area known as Birch Hill, bears highly habituated to human food have been breaking into motor vehicles, garages, sheds, and killing livestock. Fish and Game has been forced to destroy two bears at this location in one week that were destroying property of posing a human safety concern. The scat of these animals has been full of both black oil sunflower seed and cracked corn, suggesting purposeful feeding. This prompted Fish and Game to investigate an historical feed site located within a half mile of the location where the bulk of the conflicts were occurring. The resident had been previously warned to cease feeding, but had resumed the activity in spring of 2014.

The decision to kill these animals was not an easy one and not taken lightly. However, there

were few other options for these bears, for a variety of reasons. The less developed northern part of the state, where bears are typically released when translocated, is still covered in snow, offering no natural food.

The behavior of these animals and the fact that the conflicts were becoming more severe with time forced a response. Both bears were large adult males, which tend to have strong fidelity to their home range and therefore would likely have returned very quickly if moved. In my opinion, these bears had essentially been "ruined" by intentional feeding and human habituation. They had lost the ability to be wild bears that avoid human-occupied areas.

Intentional backyard feeding is not the only problem. A number of locations around the state experience bear/human conflicts each and every year. Most are areas with open or plastic-topped dumpsters (not bear proof), unsecured household garbage, bird feeders or unprotected poultry and livestock. Despite working with these residents year after year, things never seem to change. Why is that? Why are bears so devalued by some members of the public that they refuse to change their own behavior? Why is there an expectation by some members of the public that Fish and Game should remove or kill the bear, so that people are not inconvenienced by the need to change their behavior?

Could you change your own behavior just a little, so they can live here, too?

Without support and assistance from the public, Fish and Game lacks the ability to significantly change human behavior and reduce bear/human conflicts. We can't force restaurant owners to use locking, steel-top dumpsters. We can't make people put electric fence around their chickens. We can't force people to stop feeding birds during spring and summer. We can't mandate the appropriate storage of garbage and other food attractants by homeowners so that they are inaccessible to wildlife. All of these are examples of relatively simple, effective, commonsense solutions. We can't convince people not to selfishly feed bears, despite the detriment to the animal, if we are not informed of the location. We can't challenge people's constitutional right to shoot bears that cause property damage, despite the refusal of the landowner to even attempt to mitigate the conflicts. I find this very discouraging, because we are so fortunate to have this magnificent wild animal in our state. Isn't it worth changing your own behavior just a little, so they can live here, too?



We have been trying to get this message out for many years. Most residents and visitors of New Hampshire are familiar with Fish and Game's educational campaign "Something's Bruin in New Hampshire – Learn to Live with Bears." This campaign began in the mid-1990s and was designed to educate the public on bear behavior and provide proactive steps that the public could follow to avoid conflicts with bears. Essentially, it was hoped that if the public better understood bears, perhaps human tolerance towards bears would increase. One common message from this campaign is the slogan "A Fed Bear is a Dead Bear" -- a straightforward way of saying that allowing bears to become habituated to human environments and dependent on human-related foods has severe, and often fatal negative effects on the animal.

This education campaign has helped the public better understand the behavior of bears and has reduced conflicts. However, the recent incidents in which I've had to dispatch bears because of stubborn human behavior is making me lose faith. Is the public even listening anymore? Is our society that self-centered and callous towards the wildlife of our state?

The next time you are reviewing a friend's photos of a sow with cute cubs lying next to a pile of feed in their back yard, think about the consequences for the bear, and her cubs, who are learning behaviors that may result in their future death. When you see a dumpster with muddy paw prints on the side and garbage strewn through the woods, think long and hard about that image. Is that how you picture New Hampshire's majestic black bear? The next time you hear about Fish and Game biologist climbing to the top of a tree to remove cubs because the sow was shot at an unsecured chicken pen, ask yourself if that was a reasonable resolution to a conflict.

If you find these questions provoking, please lend your support and assistance. Follow the

Something's Bruin guidelines at wildnh.com/Wildlife/Somethings_Bruin.htm. Talk to your friends and neighbors and encourage them to be proactive in preventing conflicts with bears. Get active within your community and work for change. Change may be hard but it is not impossible. It's our own human behavior that creates these conflicts, and therefore it is our own behavior that needs to be modified.

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