

Benefits of the spring bear hunt in Ontario



As a long established hunting tradition, the spring bear hunt provided individual, social, cultural, economic and biological benefits.

Individual Benefits

For the spring bear hunter, the hunt provided opportunities in the spring of the year to be rewarded with the riches of the hunting experience including self-fulfillment, self-improvement, a sense of accomplishment, wholesome food for the table, valuable hides and sharing knowledge and adventures with fellow hunters, family and friends. As with any other hunting season, hunters describe it as a spiritual experience akin to religion.

Wildlife Management Benefits

As a wildlife management tool, the spring bear hunt supplied biological, social and economic benefits. The spring hunt successfully reduced bear densities, particularly male bears, and reduced bear densities immediately prior to the peak conflict period. Lower bear density has been linked to lower rates of cannibalism by male bears on other bears, predation on moose calves and deer fawns, and reduced human-bear conflicts. Ontario's black bear population is capable of sustaining a spring season in addition to the current fall season. Licensed hunters would still be limited to harvesting one bear per year (except where second seals are available), and would be able to hunt in the spring, the fall, or both.

Socio-Economic Benefits

At the time the spring bear hunt was cancelled in 1999, there were approximately 600 outfitters providing bear hunts. These 600 outfitters in turn depended on other businesses for certain goods and services (e.g. fuel, bait, equipment, etc.). Government economic data estimated that, from 1987-1998, Ontario's spring bear hunt generated \$350-\$500 million, 2,600-3,600 person-years of employment, and the participation of 90,000-100,000 hunters. In 1996 alone, the spring hunt was worth over \$43 million, and was an important contribution to local economies in northern Ontario during its shoulder tourism season. Bankruptcies, job loss and personal tragedies are the legacy of the cancellation of the spring bear hunt for the tourist industry. The provincial government also lost revenues associated with Land Use Permits, Bear Management Area Licences, and Bear Hunting Licences required by outfitters and hunters to conduct these hunts. In the mid-90s Ontario played host to over 13,000 non-resident bear hunters. In 2013, only 4,800 non-residents chose to hunt in Ontario. Many non-residents have chosen to spend their money in other jurisdictions that continue to have a spring hunting season. In 2003, the Nuisance Bear Review Committee recommended the reinstatement of the spring bear hunt for socio-economic reasons.

Cub Orphaning and Mortality

Approximately 25,000 bear cubs are born every year in Ontario. About 10,000 of these cubs will die before the age of one for reasons that have nothing to do with hunting. The most frequent causes of cub death is starvation and cannibalism by male bears. Most cases of cannibalism occur in the spring and summer before the fall hunt begins. The spring hunt has the potential to reduce cannibalism by targeting male bears. Animal rights activists often claim that over 270 bear cubs were orphaned by hunters every year in the spring. This is a deliberate misrepresentation of government data, and even caused the MNRF to issue a statement clarifying that accidental cub orphaning by hunters is extremely rare and that the number used by anti-hunters is grossly exaggerated. Shooting cubs or mothers accompanied by cubs has always been illegal under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, and methods exist to further minimize accidental cub orphaning by hunters (e.g. suspended baits, increased education). Bear cubs can become separated from their mother for various reasons: abandonment due to insufficient milk production; environmental conditions such as fire or drought; human disturbance at den sites such as resource extraction or snowmobiling; or when the mother is killed by a vehicle, hunter or as a nuisance.



Bear Behaviour

With no spring hunt, there are now more bears in the population and there are more cannibalistic males in the woods that cause other bears to avoid them, and thus, seek food in areas near people. Natural food failures exacerbate these effects. Female bears with cubs searching the woods for scarce natural foods need to avoid cannibalistic males, and can be forced into areas of human presence.

In the spring, black bears concentrate their movements in a fairly predictable manner, enabling hunters to be more successful. Furthermore, differential den emergence times means that the spring hunt is very sex-selective. Since sows with cubs emerge from the den later than other bears, they tend to be much less susceptible to hunting activity because many of them are still in the den during the hunting season.

Bear Wise

Ontario's Bear Wise Program consists of several components. The Education and Communication component teaches people how to co-exist with bears, how to properly store food and garbage, and what to do during a bear encounter. The Bear Wise Reporting Line provides a conduit for the public to report bear encounters and obtain information. Finally, the Response component includes aversive conditioning, trapping and relocation, and dispatch of repeat offenders. In 2012, the trapping and relocation of bears was significantly scaled back due to provincial budget cuts. Successful relocation depends on the bear's sex and age: only 20% of adult bears can be successfully relocated, while 40% of juvenile females and 70% of juvenile males can be relocated without reoffending. Adult bears may return from distances up to 200km. The high cost associated with relocation and the mixed success made it a logical target for elimination. Components of the Bear Wise Program can be an important tool for managing black bears, but human nature dictates that education alone will never be sufficient because not enough people will put in the required effort to fully prevent human-bear conflicts. Regulated hunting, including a spring season, is simply another tool in the wildlife manager's toolbox. Neither tool can completely eliminate black bear encounters.

The spring bear hunt is an excellent example of sustainable development in practice, where the benefits from a renewable natural resource are maximized and the costs to society are minimized. This premise ensures that the bear remains a valued asset rather than an unwanted expenditure (vermin).

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