

REGION 3 MEETING MINUTES

Black Bear Management Plan Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) Meeting

Tuesday, June 29, 2010, 1:40-3:15 pm

Virginia Department of Forestry

Attendees

Annie Downing, U.S. Forestry Service, Glenwood / Pedlar Ranger District

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Eric Hubble, Roanoke County Animal Control, Roanoke County

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Buck Kline, Bow hunter / Virginia Department of Forestry, Madison County

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Dave McRuer, The Wildlife Center of Virginia, Albemarle County / Statewide

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Dave Mumaw, Isaac Walton League, Rockingham County

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Matthew O'Quinn, Breaks Interstate Park, Dickenson County

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Pam Owen, Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection, Rappahannock County

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Bob Scott, Bear Smart, Nelson County

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David Shelor, Landowner, Roanoke County

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David Steger, Virginia Bear Hunters Association, Roanoke County

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Richard Thompson, Stoneman Rep., Botetourt County

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Jeb Wofford, Shenandoah National Park, Page County

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Absent

Laura Belleville, Appalachian Trail Conservancy Southwest and Central Virginia Office,
Montgomery County, belleville@appalachiantrail.org

Gladys King, King Brothers Orchard, Roanoke County

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Marshall Jones, Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection, Rappahannock County

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Meeting Goals

- Introductions (including those who might be absent)
- Identify and discuss bear-related issues for your region
- Establish dates and locations for future Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) meetings and the best ways to communicate amongst your regional group and the statewide group
- Recommend any other individuals or organizations that should have representation on the regional SAC

Identification of Issues and Values

Bear Population Discussion Segment

Issues Identified

Hunting as a way of controlling bear populations

- Hunting doesn't seem to be controlling bear populations
- Seeing increasing or stable but high black bear populations
- Black bear population is high, and bear hunting is not reducing the population much
- Hunting is not having a big enough impact
- Dog hunters are too selective in their kill (mostly big males)
- Dog hunters more interested in chasing and not killing
- Shenandoah National Park continues to be a big source for bears
- Hunting choices and regulations (i.e., deciding not to kill a bear unless it is a "trophy" bear and not being able to kill a mother bear with cubs, etc.) affect the population (i.e., by limiting how many bears are harvested)
 - Many hunters don't take the opportunity to kill a bear, even if they have a chance; they would rather watch them
 - People hesitant to hunt or kill bears, contributing to the population increase
 - Past history of not being able to hunt bears, populations declining – people remember this and are more hesitant to hunt or shoot bears
 - Bear meat isn't considered as palatable and rugs are expensive, which may be another reason why people might not kill bears
 - There is a changing trend of hunters not killing at every opportunity, especially for deer
 - Meat preference may be a reason hunters hesitate to harvest bear; they prefer venison

Cultural carrying capacity/public tolerance for bears

- Populations have increased (and that is a good thing), but not where people shouldn't be able to tolerate it

Population needs

- Population increases are especially important for Southside and Southwestern areas
- Black bear populations have social, economic, and recreational implications; black bear population is a benefit (e.g., tourism, economy, outdoor recreation, etc.)

Strategies/Other Comments

- Need more public education
- Increasing / high bear populations are occurring in many nearby states, not just a Virginia issue
- Phone calls to Wildlife Center of Virginia (WCV) might be another population index to use

Bear Habitat Discussion Segment

Issues Identified

Changing habitat quality

- Land use shifting from agriculture to urbanization and retirement homes (at least in some places like Rappahannock)
- Concern about hard mast failures
- Concern about changing habitat / forest composition (e.g., oaks to maple)
- Increasing number of small & underweight bears (maybe due to a mast relationship?)
- Concern about the aging forests on USFS lands – long-term loss of oak/hickory forest – habitat is changing
- Lack of clearcuts on USFS lands, resulting in less soft mast production
- Concern about gypsy moth
- Loss of mast in some areas may be reason bears are coming into developed areas, farms, crops to look for food

Strategies/Other Comments

- Despite changes, bears seem to continue to be productive; their populations are growing
- Land-use planning is important
- Trend toward private landowners wanting to protect wildlife and habitat to help bear populations and other wildlife; for example, 20% of Rappahannock County is in Conservation Easements
- Corridors might limit need to be on other properties

Bear-Related Recreation Discussion Segment

Issues Identified

General bear hunting issues

- Concern about unscrupulous hunters
- Hunting interests seem to be moving toward deer hunting and trophy hunting, rather than bear hunting
- Hunter uncertainties about killing a bear because not all bears are legal (e.g., females with cubs, too small)

Dog hunting and chase season

- Need more time with dogs in the woods
- It is unnerving to have free-ranging bear hounds cross your property – especially if you have a dog
- Does chasing bears with dogs get them habituated to dogs? Probably not
- During chase season, bears/dogs often move into and cause conflicts in no-hunting recreation areas on USFS lands, but bears also run to most remote areas
- Landowners often end up with dogs and bear hunters on private property, resulting in conflicts and trespass concerns
- Issue with hunter rights to retrieve dogs on private property and landowner rights
- More hunters are against the chase season
- Public and hunter concerns about hound hunting
- Problem is that hound hunters are a minority and different
- Different than hunting to actually kill a bear, chase may be considered simply as harassment, which some people have a problem with
- Chase season may increase interest in bear-related recreation

Non-hunting wildlife recreation and observation

- There is an issue about getting information (and the correct information) to the public – maybe using bear cams or other web-based systems

- Public land is important to provide opportunities for bear-related recreation, probably more so in other regions
- Some people are afraid to walk/hike in bear country

Strategies/Other Comments

- Webcam systems (like at WCV) could provide viewing opportunities in addition to visits to parks
- An Internet site where you could watch a mother bear at any time had lots of hits, piqued a lot of interest, such events or projects that raise interest in bears may also present an opportunity to educate people about bears; money and education can be generated by such opportunities
- Black bears are a strong tourist interest
- Can teach people to recognize bear “sign”
- Bear chase opportunities are valuable – especially for kids
- People ask where to go to see bears; there is a strong interest to see bears (often sent to SNP)
- There is a good chance of seeing a bear (for any activity, such as wildlife viewing, hunting, etc.)

Human-Bear Problems Discussion Segment

Issues Identified

People contributing to nuisance behavior

- People not taking/following advice to eliminate bear problems
- Improper food/trash storage
- Birdfeeders are a problem
- Illegal feeding of wildlife or bears
- How to pay for extra needs; who should pay?
- Concern about enforcement issues and follow-up to enforce feeding laws
- Public education/awareness

Urbanization and development—people in bear country

- Development, such as new homes, buildings, and roads, are resulting in more human-bear interaction
- Problem with new residents moving to rural areas (bear habitat) from more urban areas, creating more nuisance opportunities and chances to see bear
- Lots of people
- Lots of people living next to refuges, WMAs, or abundant habitat (e.g., Havens WMA, Shenandoah National Park, National Forests), leading to more confrontation
- Issues with people moving into bear country
- Problems with transient visitors to campgrounds; they would be unaware of existing habituated bear conflicts—possibly dangerous

Bear behavior

- Bears still come to corn/feeders from existing natural habitat
- Concern about rain barrel damage (Rappahannock)
- How to keep bears from people

Bear cubs

- There is no outlet to deal with orphaned cubs – sometimes people try to raise them on their own

- People trying to raise bear cubs; could be a combination of reasons, including increased population resulting in more cubs or people not getting the response they want from organizations they contact for help with bear issues

Health and safety issues

- Bear on roads, people hitting bear with car; bear harder to see on road at night
- People trying to raise bear cubs results in health and safety hazards and risks
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Strategies/Other Comments

- Suggestion that no bird feeding from April to December in community has been effective at reducing human-bear conflicts
- Increasing education and awareness; lack of education appears to be an underlying issue for human-bear problems
- Need a coordinated, statewide volunteer group for educators; a bear network
- Fines may be effective in addition to the education
- Fines related to bear issues should go specifically to bear education and bear management
- Biological carrying capacity and cultural carrying capacity are two different things, and it may be that the biological carrying capacity is sufficient for bear population increase but that the cultural carrying capacity, or people, are not
- Corn crops and mast are different seasons, so addressing mast loss may not solve the agricultural conflicts
- Problems are seasonal
- People are the problem
- Does hunting/chasing help to keep bears wild? For example, narrow Shenandoah National Park whose bears get hunted has fewer nuisance problems than Smoky Mountain National Park
- Related enforcement issues are people ignoring the education information given

Upcoming Meetings

Tentative Meeting Dates and Locations

- Tuesday, August 3, 10:00 a.m. – (approximately) 3:00 p.m., Roanoke
- Wednesday, September 8, 10:00 a.m. – (approximately) 3:00 p.m., Verona
- Date and location of third meeting will be determined at September 8 meeting

Suggestions for Additional Region 3 Committee Members

- Representative from Audubon Society, specifically for Region 3 (to represent those who like to feed birds)
- An additional representative from west of Roanoke
- Representative from the tourist industry, specifically the commercial side of tourism, such as a bed and breakfast association
- Representative from eco-tourism

Action Items

1. Responsive Management to provide meeting minutes for regional group breakout sessions
2. Responsive Management to coordinate second meeting locations, dates, and times for each region
3. Responsive Management to develop a clearinghouse online for access to meeting materials and distribute all information to SAC members

4. VDGIF to identify additional regional representatives for SACs
5. SAC members to review the technical portion of the bear management plan in preparation for the next SAC regional meeting
6. SAC members to begin thinking about issues identified and values associated with these issues for upcoming meeting