

A black bear is the central focus of the image, standing on a large, weathered log. The bear has thick, black fur and a lighter brown patch on its snout. It is looking towards the left of the frame. The background is a soft-focus natural setting with tall grasses and green foliage. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Ontario's Problems With Black Bears As Complicated As Nature Itself

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My wife and I own a remote wilderness vacation resort in Ontario's Chapleau Crown Game Preserve, the world's largest wildlife sanctuary. We offer a wide variety of nature interpretation and photographic experiences, along with fishing. The Chapleau Game Preserve covers over 7,000 square kilometers (3,000 square miles) in the middle of Ontario's Boreal Forest, straddling the height of land between Hudson Bay and Lake Superior and completely surrounding Missinaibi Provincial Park. There has been no hunting or trapping here since 1925. I am the second generation in this business and have spent most of my life here.

Living in the world's largest wildlife sanctuary for over 30 years, I have had the opportunity to study nature and wildlife, which has not been affected by hunting or trapping. Some people feel that killing animals is man's most significant impact on wildlife populations. It is actually our changes to the environment that affects nature and wildlife so drastically. Many of our effects on wildlife and the environment are direct, most are indirect, some effects are many steps removed from what we have actually done. Many of our actions have extremely positive affects for some species which nature balances with extremely negative repercussions for other species. Nature is an enormously complex system, which is constantly changing and always balancing itself. Nature will not compensate for our actions, but it will balance our actions in ways which we may not be able to predict because we do not have the capacity, or the intimate knowledge of the complexity of nature, required. We may feel that our actions should not have the effects they do, but nature has it's own rules.

Black Bears' Environmental Role

Black Bears are one of the most important animals in the Ontario ecosystem. Black Bears are an intelligent, very adaptable animal with enormous appetites and a biologically programmed instinct to eat whatever they can find, wherever they can find it. Their primary role in nature is to ensure that nothing is wasted. Black Bears have the ability to eat anything that is edible by any other animal. The range of food that Black Bears eat changes significantly throughout the year and includes animals which died over the winter, fish spawning in the spring and fall, nuts and berries during the height of summer, insects and grubs when and where they can find them, and any animal which they can kill without endangering themselves. It is very important to recognize that Black Bears are classified as a carnivore because they kill and eat other animals. Nuts and berries are significantly available for only 1-2 months during the year. The other 6-8 months that Black Bears are not hibernating they must eat fish, insects and other animals to survive.

All Black Bears are predatory animals. Which species of animals a Black Bear preys on depends on how large the Black Bear is compared to prospective prey animals, how aggressive the individual Black Bear's personality is, how desperate for food the Black Bear is, and how familiar the Black Bear is with the prospective prey animal. The higher any of these factors are, the greater the range of species and size of animals a Black Bear will prey on. Male Black Bears (Boars) tend to be more aggressive than female Black Bears (Sows), but many female Black Bears are very aggressive.

In the spring, Black Bears target newly born animals such as Moose calves, Beaver kits, and many animals, which live, or have their young, in dens where they can be easily trapped. Black Bears prefer to kill young animals because they are safer and easier to kill. Black Bears will actually track and harass female moose until they birth their calf. Both the female Moose and the calf are very vulnerable at that point and often both are killed. Large Black Bears also kill full grown moose, usually when the Moose has bedded down to sleep. Black Bears are the only animal in Ontario that can easily tear apart a Beaver Lodge. Newly born beavers can be trapped in their den when the Black Bear tears it apart to eat them. Beaver are also very vulnerable to Black Bear when they are gathering their winter food supply of tree branches in the late summer and fall. All other denning animals, such as marmot, lynx and wolf, are vulnerable because Black Bears can dig them out and the parent animals can do nothing about it except

endanger themselves. Even Timber Wolves will not tackle a medium to large Black Bear. Bird nests also, whether they are in trees or near the ground are vulnerable to Black Bears.

Black Bears have only one natural population control of any significance, availability of food. Black Bears have a very robust biology, which has a low susceptibility to disease and parasites. Black Bears are also a very anti-social animal so any diseases or parasites they are susceptible to, are not easily transferred. The only real natural predator of Black Bear, is Black Bear, however Black Bears are a dangerous prey unless there is a significant difference in size. It is fairly common however, for larger Black Bears, usually males, to kill and eat Black Bear cubs, especially in the spring when food is scarce. Large male Black Bears will also kill and eat the female Black Bears which are not ready to mate, or if the female is protecting her cubs. Everything is food for a Black Bear.

The Black Bears' entire biology is tied to gathering food, even reproduction. Although Black Bears mate in the early spring, the young only implant into the uterus in late summer if the female has had enough food to produce the substantial fat she needs to nurse her cubs from mid winter through spring. The more food she has in mid summer, the more cubs she will bring to term. If she does not have enough food she will absorb her young back into her system so she can get pregnant again the next spring. The timing of this delayed implantation coincides with the nut and berry season. If there are lots of nuts and berries, Black Bears have lots of cubs. If there are less nuts and berries, Black Bears have less cubs. Berries and nuts are how we have had such a significant impact on Black Bear populations, and therefore on all of the other wildlife species on which they prey.

Clear Cut Logging is Not Natural

Some people feel that the cancellation of Ontario's spring hunt for Black Bears is responsible for Ontario's current overpopulation of Black Bears. Ontario's Black Bear population was rising well before the spring Black Bear hunt was cancelled. The spring Black Bear hunt was slowing down the increase in the Black Bear population, especially the portion of the Black Bear population more likely to be a problem. The reason the Black Bear population has been increasing in Ontario is because we have changed the environment to favour Black Bears.

Natural regeneration of the Boreal Forest is through wildfire. After wildfire there are very few nuts and berries except around the cooler edges. Burned areas are filled with new forest growth and fireweed, which are not good sources of food for Black Bears. After clear-cut logging there are enormous amounts of nuts and berries throughout the area for many years. The abundance of nuts and berries stimulates Black Bear reproduction. Decades ago 1-2 cubs was normal and 3 cubs were rare. Now 3-4 cubs are fairly close to average. Because Ontario's current Black Bear population is based on an overabundance of nuts and berries in a 1-2 month period of the year, we now have an overabundance of Black Bears in Ontario with not enough food to sustain them the rest of the year. All of the Black Bears other food sources have remained the same or decreased while the Black Bear population has been increasing. The availability of insects and grubs has declined because we have much less old growth. Spawning fish are available for only a short season in the spring and fall. This leaves predation of other animals as the Black Bears only natural source of food for much of the year.

Clear-cut logging is economical, not ecological. Clear-cut logging with replanting is in no way similar to wildfire regeneration other than they are both large-scale disturbances of the forest ecology. Boreal Forest growth after a forest fire is much more vigorous and healthy, because of the chemical changes in the soil and the eradication of most parasites, diseases and competing vegetation. Replanting after clear-cut logging does not have the significant environmental and long-term forest health benefits of wildfire. If logging in the Boreal Forest were planned so fire could be used extensively in regeneration, logging would not have near the impact on Black Bear and other wildlife populations. In the short term, use of fire in regeneration can be more expensive than replanting, especially when forest management planning is not conducive to using wildfire regeneration. There are also other values that need to be considered in using wildfire, and our culture has a significant prejudice against wildfire, but the long-term benefits of wildfire to the forest ecosystem and nature's balance cannot be duplicated artificially.

Black Bears are not the only animal in Ontario whose populations have increased because we have changed the environment. Agriculture, and the eradication of predatory animals, has made an environment very favourable to White Tail Deer, which have become overpopulated in many areas of Ontario. The overpopulated White Tail Deer suffer from disease and seasonal starvation while eradicating much of the habitat many bird and small animal species need to survive.

Too Many Black Bears

Overpopulations of Black Bears means overpredation of wildlife species they prey on, including moose, beaver, lynx, marmot and wolf. Black Bears have always killed moose calves in the spring for food. When Ontario had a more normal Black Bear population, they killed about 10-30% of the Moose calves each year. Now predation of Moose calves is as high as 80% in some areas. This is one of the more significant reasons why moose populations are becoming so low near areas where there has been recent clear-cut logging, which is most of Ontario.

In the Chapleau Game Preserve, there has been no hunting or trapping since 1925. Our resort has been in operation inside the Chapleau Game Preserve since the mid 1950's. My family has owned our resort for over 30 years. There were almost no problems with Black Bears until about 15 years ago, a little over 5 years after clear-cut logging became prevalent in our vicinity. We now take significant precautions to avoid problems with Black Bears, which were totally unnecessary 20-30 years ago.

30 years ago the Chapleau Game Preserve had one of the highest moose populations in Ontario, now it is one of the lowest. This happened with essentially no effect from hunting except for a negligible impact from poaching. Most female moose used to have 1-2 calves yearly, now most female moose have lost their calves by early summer and many moose have significant scarring from unsuccessful Bear attacks. We now see Black Bears daily where they used to be a rare sighting most of the summer 20-30 years ago. Our guests have watched Black Bears tear apart beaver dens in the spring to get the kits. What changed? In the last 30 years most of the forest in the Chapleau Game Preserve has been clear-cut. The clear cuts have produced an abundance of nuts and berries, which has produced an over abundance of Black Bears, which has significantly reduced Moose, and other, wildlife populations. In the Chapleau Game Preserve, the effects of clear-cut logging on wildlife populations in Boreal Forest are unmistakable since hunting and trapping are not really a factor.

Grizzly Bears and Animal Rights

Some of the more radical elements in the animal rights movement have misinformed the public regarding Black Bears and Black Bear Hunting. Unfortunately some radical opportunists choose causes based on how easy a target they are, how politically correct they are, or how much income they can leverage from donations. Much of the misinformation about Black Bears is based on actual problems with some Grizzly Bear populations. Grizzly Bears do not live in Ontario. Black Bears are related to Grizzly Bears but they are significantly different animals and our impact on their populations is totally different. Grizzly Bears start breeding at 5-6 years and can have 1-3 cubs every third year. Black Bears start reproducing at 3 years and can have 1-5 cubs every second year. This means, in good conditions, Black Bears can reproduce 6 times faster than Grizzly Bears. Black Bears are also smaller than Grizzly Bears allowing them to survive downturns in food supply better. Because radical opportunists have brought a lot of attention to unfounded and inconsequential issues regarding Black Bears, any real problems with Grizzly Bear populations are less likely to be addressed. Black Bears may even be a factor in any Grizzly Bear population problems. There is significant clear-cut logging in Western Canada and the United States where Black Bears share habitat with Grizzly Bears. Are burgeoning Black Bear populations a factor in declining Grizzly Bear populations because Black Bears are so adaptable to human interference and compete for food with the Grizzly Bears?

Another significant difference between Black Bears and Grizzly Bears is that Grizzly Bears are more of a carrion eater and Black Bears are more of a predator. This is why Grizzly Bear attacks generally happen when people have surprised them, while most Black Bear attacks are predatory. The Black Bears are hungry and they regard the people they attack, or what the people are carrying, as food.

This is also why playing dead if actually attacked by a Grizzly Bear sometimes saves lives but is not a good idea with Black Bears. The Grizzly Bear may not have been hungry to begin with plus Grizzly Bears may let their food rot a bit. Black Bears are a more opportunistic predator even if they are relatively smaller.

Two other areas where animal rights radicals have significantly misinformed the public is in regard to hunting Black Bears in the spring and hunting Black Bears using bait. Hunting Black Bears using bait, in the spring, is the most humane and ethical way to hunt Black Bears. First, ethical hunters do not want to kill nursing female Black Bears. In the spring anyone can tell if a Black Bear is a nursing female. It is physically obvious, plus the cubs stay very close to her. Anyone who shoots a nursing female Black Bear in the spring should not have a hunting license. They are either not taking a good look at what they are shooting, or they do not care what they kill. Contrary to innuendoes from some of the radical animal rights groups, the incidences of nursing female Black Bears being shot when Ontario had a spring Black Bear hunt were very rare. Baiting allows a hunter to take a really good look at what they are shooting to make sure it is the animal they want to shoot and that they have a good clear shot that will dispatch the animal cleanly and humanely. Black Bear meat is tasty and nutritious, but in the spring the meat on a Black Bear is at it's best because it is so much leaner. Black Bear pelts are also at their best in the spring.

Bait hunting for Black Bears, especially in the spring, also targets the Black Bears most likely to be problem Bears. Whether because of desperation, food preferences or personality, some Black Bears are more likely to come to baits, and other Black Bears won't come anywhere near baits. The Black Bears that come to baits are the same Black Bears that will raid garbage cans, composters, birdfeeders, and fruit trees as well as break into homes, cottages and other buildings. Black Bears killed over baits in the spring, not only helps reduce Ontario's overpopulation of Black Bears, it targets the problem portion of the Black Bear population. Using Bait to harvest Black Bears has few negative repercussions for the Black Bear species unlike the practice of feeding deer, which is a significant factor in spreading disease.

Unfortunately, radical elements of the animal rights movement have wasted a lot of financial and other resources, which legitimate environmental groups really need to make a difference on habitat issues affecting species survival. Legitimate animal rights groups, who tackle the tough issues such as abusive animal owners and Black market trade in exotic species, are also suffering from lack of financial resources as well as some erosion of credibility. Misinformation also further disconnects people from nature because people have less or erroneous knowledge about what really happens in nature and our effects on our natural environment.

Black Bear Safety

Black Bears are large carnivores, which have significant potential to be a danger to humans. To Black Bears, we humans are just another animal which are a potential source of food, or danger, for them. Other than for mating, wild Black Bears have no desire for social relationships with other Black Bears, let alone with humans. Black Bears want to be petted and cuddled by humans about as much as, and probably less than, we want to be petted and cuddled by Black Bears.

The biggest factor in our relationship with Black Bears is food because that is what Black Bears are always searching for. The more we remove food from our interactions with Black Bears, the fewer problems we have with Black Bears. The other significant factor, in our relationship with Black Bears, is that familiarity breeds contempt. Wild Black Bears have a natural caution about humans because we are an unfamiliar animal and, at first glance, we seem bigger than they are and therefore potentially dangerous. It is when Black Bears are around humans a lot that they can lose their caution about humans, especially if there is food involved.

All Black Bears are essentially obsessive compulsive about food. Once a Black Bear has found a source of food, they will keep coming back to the same source, or repeating the same behavior, to get more. Black Bears have a tremendous memory for any location, or action, which brings them food. This is why backpackers dropping their backpack with food when they encounter a Black Bear, encourages

that Black Bear to chase other hikers. They have learned that if they chase that 2-legged animal it will drop food. A Black Bear that has learned a habit will keep repeating it because it worked once.

Black Bears' instinct is to intimidate or be intimidated. If you don't act like a panicky animal then the Black Bear may consider you too dangerous to tackle. If you encounter a Black Bear, stand still, and make yourself look as big as possible. If there is shelter nearby, move slowly toward it while facing the Black Bear. If it moves toward you, stop. Never run from a Black Bear or climb a tree. Running is a signal that you are a weak animal and Black Bears can climb a tree faster than most people can run. If a Black Bear's head is high it is generally non-aggressive. If a Black Bear stands up on two legs it is merely curious. If a Black Bear's head is low, be careful. If a Black Bear charges, stand still so it thinks you are not afraid.

Black Bears have a very keen sense of smell, are agile climbers, fast runners, great swimmers and are very powerful. Black Bears are also curious and one of the more intelligent animals in the forest. To avoid attracting Black Bears when camping, make sure your food is very well secured and do not dispose of waste food in your vicinity. It is best to prepare only as much food as you will actually eat so you do not have to dispose of leftovers. If you do have to dispose of waste food, take it a very significant distance from your campsite. Burying waste food in the vicinity of your campsite is not a good idea because of Black Bears incredible sense of smell. Burning waste food may not be completely effective. If there is a significant lack of natural food for Black Bears because of a poor berry season, or a significant overpopulation, be extra cautious of being an attraction for Black Bears. Also, if you are camping where other people have camped before, you may inherit problems they created.

Conclusion

Black Bears are not the peaceful berry eaters some people portray them to be, but they are not ravening monsters either. Black Bears do kill and eat other animals, especially young animals such as Moose, Deer, Beaver and animals that have their young in a dens. Black Bears also kill and eat other Black Bears for food and to decrease competition. Black Bears can be a danger to humans when they lose their natural caution about us, or if there is a lack of more easily accessible food. This is all normal behavior for Black Bears who use their intelligence and significant adaptability to take advantage of any circumstances, which help them survive. To expect Black Bears to behave according to our values is naive. We must respect Black Bears for the magnificent animals they are and not expect them to behave like some fictionalized fantasy creature we see on television. To humanize Black Bears is wrong. Black Bears are a different animal from us and have their own values. Black Bears do not think like people just as we do not think like Black Bears. To Black Bears, humans are just another animal which are potentially a source of food, or danger, to them.

A healthy Black Bear population is an essential component of Ontario's natural environment, however, overpopulations of a top-level predator, such as the Black Bear, is damaging to all other wildlife populations and can be dangerous to the public. Well planned hunting can help to reduce some of our effects on Black Bear populations but the overabundance of nuts and berries after clear-cut logging will continue to stimulate female Black Bears to produce high numbers of cubs for which there is not enough food. Nature is complex but has a simple objective, balance. We must recognize that we are part of nature and our actions have a significant effect on all of the creatures we share this planet with.

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