



BlackBearsMatter™

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**An open letter to Members of the
Water and Natural Resources Committee**

We have a bear problem in New Mexico, but it's not only the bears' fault.

This summer has been one of the worst on record when it comes to available forest food for our state's animals. Due to cyclical southwestern droughts, this lack of water has delayed the natural food cycle. Berries and nuts have matured much later than normal and there is fierce competition for them now - especially among our state's animal, the Black Bear. Because of these conditions, bears are quite naturally venturing into residential areas to look for food, and that's when the delicate balance between animals and people begins to break down. When bears look for food outside the forest many homeowners call the New Mexico Game & Fish Department (G&F) to intervene.

Unfortunately, those interventions often end in the death of the animal, because for some in positions of power bears are regarded as 'nuisance animals' like coyotes. Our Black Bears live with a permanent death sentence hanging over their heads because the guidelines for killing them (G&F Memorandum of March 27, 2012 from James S. Lane, Director) are too general and give largely unchecked latitude to G&F when it comes to their destruction. They allow for a potentially indiscriminate destruction of bears that are just exhibiting normal behavior, especially during periods of meager food availability like we're experiencing now.

When I recently asked a G&F representative who was speaking at a public information event about how he decided when a bear should be killed, he responded, "We just use our own judgment." Imagine if police officers were allowed to unholster their weapons and to justify firing them without sufficient guidelines that protected the innocent.

Several years ago, many bears were given the benefit of the doubt and a reprieve from execution. Many were relocated and not killed as they are today. During the last five years, mature female bears (sows) were being killed by hunters at lower rates, in the 30% range. This year, however, G&F is allowing up to 38% of mature females to be destroyed AND neither are they relocating cubs that have been separated from their mothers.

When I recently asked a northern New Mexico animal refuge, how many cubs had been brought to the refuge the representative told me, "We haven't seen any cubs in well over a year." This can mean one of two things: either cubs are not being separated from their mothers anymore OR they are being killed instead of relocated.

We kill too many bears and base the size of the 'harvest' (a euphemism for killing them) on out of date bear population information that uses sample data sets that are just too small. Last year, in 2017, G&F killed 70% of the bears they trapped - 70%. Surely some of those bears could have been relocated. Our desire for destruction is not only sentencing more of the current generation of bears to death but we are condemning the next one, too - the cubs - to the same fate.

The Committee has the power to effect real change and help solve New Mexico's 'bear problem.'

- please turn the page to see some solutions

There are systemic problems with our bear management in New Mexico, but there are also some possible solutions to them. Consider these...

Problem: We kill too many bears and justify it by using faulty data.

Solution: Cooperate with other states and use their best practices to help craft a sound bear management program for New Mexico (Colorado has one) AND implement it.

Problem: Lack of transparency. Communities and neighborhoods have no way of seeing, in real time - on a daily basis - where bears have been killed, for what reasons and how.

Solution: G&F can put up the data on these depredations (bear deaths other than hunting kills) on their website, on a daily basis, so that everyone can see it.

Problem: We have bear destruction guidelines that don't favor relocation over destruction or mandate a kill justification.

Solution: Re-draft the guidelines and make officers accountable for each and every bear kill.

Problem: We have only one conservationist on the NM Game Commission out of seven members.

Solution: Name a conservationist to the seventh (open) commission seat.

Problem: We don't insist that homeowners electrify their chicken coops or bear-proof their refuse containers.

Solution: Establish an outreach program of state-sponsored assistance through G&F to homeowners wishing to bear-proof their surroundings and animal pens and teach them how to interact with bears.

Problem: We have a 'bear as nuisance' culture in New Mexico instead of a 'bear as state treasure' culture, and it is reflected in the alarming number of depredation kills and the higher-than-necessary hunting quotas.

Solution: Change the culture through more information, more compassionate bear encounters by G&F personnel and more interaction with the public.

Finally, the real enemy of our bears is our unwillingness to cooperate with each other or confront the real issues facing them. By the simple act of saving, relocating or rehabilitating one bear we not only show respect for the creatures we are pledged to protect, but we also honor our commitment to ourselves as stewards of nature.



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Black Bears Matter