



Briefing Paper on Bear Hunting Referendum

By the

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife

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Issue:

The Humane Society and Maine Friends of Animals are laying the groundwork for a statewide referendum to change the way bears are hunted in Maine. They have formed a political action committee called Maine Citizens for Fair Bear Hunting and are seeking to ban the taking of bears over bait, with hounds, and by trapping.

Position of the Department:

Maine's wildlife is a public trust resource, which means no one can own them and they must be held in trust for all Maine's residents. The Department has been mandated in statute to:

- Preserve, protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources of the state.
- Encourage the wise use of these resources.
- Ensure coordinated planning for these resources.
- Provide for effective management of these resources.

The proposed referendum to limit methods of take for bear threatens the Department's ability to meet these mandates by:

- Compromising the Department's ability to effectively manage bears by eliminating critical management tools.
- Discouraging the wise use of the bear resource by eliminating traditional, time-tested harvest methods.

MDIFW's bear management program is based on extensive collection of detailed scientific data and structured, in-depth public involvement, and seeks to maintain the long-term viability of the bear population. The needs of the species, the public, and the sportsmen and women of the State are balanced. This ensures a healthy bear population for enjoyment by Maine's citizens and visitors, minimal nuisance complaints, and a strong economic contribution.

Black Bears in Maine: Current Status and Knowledge

Black bears are widely distributed in Maine, occurring in all but the extreme south central and southwestern portions of the State. The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife estimates that Maine has approximately 23,000 bears, the highest black bear population of any state in the lower 48.

Bear management in Maine reflects the species' rise in status from a pest to big game species. Concurrently, they have received increased protection and monitoring over the last hundred years. Bear were hunted year round for much of the first half of the century and were bountied until 1957. Bear seasons were shortened to a 6-month period in the 1960s. Since 1982, a 3-month fall-only season has been in place.

The Department began monitoring bear harvests in 1969, and more formal studies in 1975. In 1982, the Department intensified its efforts to gather information from live and hunter-killed bears in a continuing effort to improve its understanding of the species. Since 1983, biologists have tracked 40-50 radio-

collared bears annually, recording detailed information on their survival, reproduction, behavior, and condition. The Department's bear work is state of the art and is one of the most extensive, comprehensive, and longest standing bear studies in North America. Information from research bears is combined with data from hunter-killed bears to refine management programs.

The Department uses a publicly driven planning process to establish bear population objectives for each of 30 Wildlife Management Districts. The most recent update of that plan was completed in 1999, with input generated from a public working group representing a wide array of stakeholders (landowners, forest industry, sportsmen, environmentalists, etc.) interested in bear. In 2000, our Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council approved new management goals and objectives to drive the Department's bear management program through 2015. The Department's bear management goal is to provide hunting, trapping, and viewing opportunity of bears. Three management objectives include:

- 1) Stabilize the bear population by 2005 at no less than levels experienced in 1999 (23,000 bears statewide), through annual hunting and trapping harvests.
- 2) Create information and education programs that target specific audiences and promote traditional hunting and trapping methods as valid and preferred tools to manage black bear populations in Maine.
- 3) Create information and education programs that target specific audiences and promote public tolerance of bears in Maine.

The Department employs recreational hunting as the primary tool to meet these objectives. By statute, Maine's bear season currently extends from late August through November. Hunters may take one bear per year: bait, hound, still-hunting, stalking, and trapping are legal methods of take with restrictions on timing and methods (see below). From 1990-2002, bear harvests averaged 2,673 and the bear population increased during this same period.

The Current Situation:

The ethics of hunting bears, and the methods used to hunt bears, have been debated elsewhere in North America. Voters in Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and Massachusetts have outlawed the use of bait and/or hounds to hunt bears in recent years. Michigan and Idaho voters rejected referenda in 1996 that would have prohibited hunting bears over bait and hounds. Instead, Michigan voters gave the Michigan's Commission on Natural Resources exclusive authority to manage game using sound, scientific principles. Maine is one of a small number of states that permit the use of bait and hounds to hunt bear, and is the only state that permits trapping for bear.

Based on considerations described below, the Department believes the loss of hunting methods in Maine to be unwarranted biologically, recreationally, and economically.

1) Biological Considerations

Bears have a role in Maine's forest ecosystem. This is recognized by the hunting and non-hunting public alike and is the basis for publicly derived bear management goals and objectives.

The Department's bear management program is based on extensive collection of scientific data, structured and in-depth public involvement, and seeks to maintain the long-term viability of the bear population. The Department has used regulated recreational hunting as the primary tool to achieve bear management objectives. The loss of hunting methods may compromise the Department's ability to achieve those population objectives. Traditional harvest methods are tools that allow the department to respond to changing habitat conditions, variations in interest in recreational hunting, and social expectations about bear population levels. Loss of these tools will reduce the department's flexibility to address these variations and may force liberalizations in the bear season and in policy regarding nuisance bears.

2) Recreational Considerations

Maine's large bear population provides a range of benefits to residents and visitors of the State. Bears are considered by many as a symbol of "wildness" and just knowing that they are present in the forest is important. Bear hunting supplies successful hunters with excellent table fare and hunting experiences and sustains a guiding and outfitting industry that helps to support rural economies. In recent years, the public's interest in opportunities to view bears has been on the rise, largely fueled by the increased bear population and visibility of bears along roadsides.

The Department has closely monitored Maine's bear harvest for nearly 35 years and has structured the harvest to ensure that the integrity and viability of the bear population, and to provide recreational hunting opportunities. A survey of bear hunters in 1988 estimated that 20,676 hunters (14,321 residents; 6,355 nonresidents) pursued bears that year. Most nonresident respondents (62%) hired a Registered Maine Guide to assist them during their hunt; only 4% of resident bear hunters used the services of a guide.

Other recreational demands for bears are difficult to measure. Maine's dense forests provide few opportunities to view bears. However, bears remain a popular species with campers, fishermen, and other outdoor enthusiasts that are able to catch a glimpse of them. Statistics on the public's interest in viewing bears in particular are unavailable, but 54% of people traveling to view wildlife in Maine during 1996 were interested in watching large land mammals, including deer, bear and moose.

3) Economic Considerations

Loss of traditional bear harvest methods will have economic ramifications to the State's economy, the guiding and outfitting industry, Department revenue, and animal damage control costs.

Maine's Economy: The 1988 survey of bear hunters estimated that bear hunting generated \$6.4 million, including \$3.4 million of new money for the State's economy provided by nonresident hunters (Reiling et al. 1991). No other measures of the economic benefit of bear hunting have been published.

Guides and Outfitters: Using the percentage of nonresident hunters that use a guide as a basis and multiplying by an average price of \$1,000 for a guided hunt, the direct fiscal impact to the guiding industry is \$4,564,440. This figure does not include any measure of other impacts such as retail sales or taxidermy. This impact is delivered in the more rural areas of the state primarily the northern, eastern and western mountain regions.

Department Revenue: Although overall participation in hunting in Maine is declining slightly, sales of bear permits are rising, from 12,000 permits in 1990 to 15,214 in 2002. Maine residents purchased over half of the permits last year (resident 7,852, non-resident 7,362).

The fiscal impact of the early bear season on the Department is also significant because of the number of permits sold. Current license and permit sales are identified below.

Type of Permit	Permit # Sold	Permit Cost	Total Cost
NR Bear hunt permit	7362	\$65	\$ 478,530
NR Hunting Licenses	7362	\$85	\$ 625,770
Resident Bear permit	7852	\$25	\$ 196,300
Resident Hunting Licenses	1000	\$19	\$ 19,000
Total financial impact to the Department			\$1,496,900

Animal Damage Control Costs:

The loss of traditional bear hunting methods will cause the black bear population to increase, with a consequent increase in nuisance complaints. Increased human-bear encounters will require expensive relocation or lethal control of bears. The Department's animal damage control budget has been eliminated as part of the recent budget balancing measures; therefore, new sources of funds would need to be identified.

Discussion of the Harvest Methods in Question:

Bear hunting is enjoyed by thousands of sportsmen and women each year, and the traditional hunting methods have a long history of successful use in Maine. About 60% of recent bear harvests have been taken over bait, 15% over hounds, and 2% by trapping. Hunters that still-hunt or stalk bears take the remainder (23%), often taking them incidentally to hunting other species. All methods of take are associated with a specific season, are selective, and must be done in accordance with the laws in MRSA Title 12.

In addition to the restrictions described above, further information regarding harvest methods follows:

Bear Trapping:

- The bear trapping season runs from September 1 to October 31.
- Bear may be trapped only with the use of cable traps (foot snares), conventional foothold traps (only used by a few trappers), and cage-type live traps.
- No person may have more than 2 traps set for bear at any time.
- Whenever foothold and cage-type live traps are used, each trap must be enclosed in fencing and clearly identified by signs.
- Foot snares and foothold traps must be set at or below ground level in such a manner as to catch the animal only by the foot or leg.
- There are regulations regarding bait placement when trapping for bear.

Maine is the only state in the U.S. that allows the use of foothold traps to harvest bear. Most trapping is conducted using Aldrich foot snares; however foothold traps are legal in Maine, though not used by many trappers. Aldrich foot snares are also used in the Department's bear capture and tagging program and are selective, humane, and effective trapping devices. Although the Department has no polling data on public attitudes in Maine regarding trapping of bears, results from other states with similar referenda indicate that some members of the public consider this practice to cause bears unreasonable pain and suffering.

Hunting With Hounds:

- Bear hunting with hounds is allowed from September 8 to October 31.
- A person may not use more than 4 dogs at any one time to hunt bear.
- Residents may train up to 4 dogs at a time on bear from August 1 to the first day of the open season on hunting bear, except in certain locations.

Use of hounds is the most physically demanding hunting method, often requiring many miles of hiking to follow hounds on the chase. Success rates on individual chases are usually low (< 20%). Training and keeping effective bear dogs is very expensive and time consuming, so participation is limited. Hunting with coursing hounds is a tradition that goes back to medieval Europe.

Although the Department has no polling data on public attitudes in Maine regarding hunting with hounds, results from other states with similar referenda indicate that some believe that hunting with hounds is inhumane because of the possibility of an extended chase and resultant stress on the bear as well as

potential injury to bears and dogs during a physical encounter (usually, bears are not injured in any way). Also, some believe it is not in the spirit of “fair chase” to use dogs to tree a bear, and then shoot it.

Hunting over Bait:

- Hunting bear over bait is allowed from August 25 to September 20, and bait can be set out starting July 26.
- There are several regulations that address the placement of bait to avoid travel ways, dumps, campgrounds, and dwellings, and that address timing for placement, cleanup and signage.
- Hunting bear over bait is the most effective way to hunt bear in Maine’s landscape (heavily forested with thick undergrowth), and this method is currently the most effective way for the Department to achieve its publicly derived bear management objectives.

Although the Department has no polling data on public attitudes in Maine regarding hunting with bait, results from other states with similar referenda indicate that baiting is criticized because some feel that it takes away from the dignity and wildness of the bear. Some are also concerned that providing food that is commonly found at human settlements and introducing human scent in conjunction with food may encourage bears to become less fearful of humans, and to enter human settlements and camp areas more frequently in search of food. Additionally, some feel that it is not in the spirit of “fair chase” to lure a bear with food and then shoot it.

In almost all forms of hunting, hunters select sites with natural foods, and use lures, scents, decoys, and manual and electronic calls to attract their quarry. Aspects of all of these techniques are inherent in all hunting and have been a part of hunting since its beginnings.

Summary:

This referendum questions the Department’s ability and credibility to manage Maine’s bear resource. Information from other states who have dealt with this issue indicates one of the major public concerns was the health of the bear population and whether the state was effectively managing the bear population. For that reason alone, the Department needs to be on the forefront of this issue as a source of information on bear management, and the impacts and practices of different hunting methods on the resource.

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