

by E.L. Young and Tom McCarthy

Salmon curing in the smokehouse, barbecue cooling on the grill after a dinner of fresh venison, a bag full of Dungeness crab shells in the garbage can: more than just the smells of a late summer weekend in southeast Alaska, these are an open invitation to hungry bears. Bears are attracted to abundant food sources and are especially fond of human food. Cooking odors or the smell of garbage will bring bears to camps, homes or garbage dumps as surely as if they were deliberately baited. Once bears have become habituated to "fast food," it is difficult or impossible to convince them that roots and berries are better for their health.

In southeast Alaska the proliferation of towns, villages, and camps associated with logging and mining operations continues to draw more people into bear country. As the human population increases, conflicts between bears and people are increasing. Americans produce an astonishing amount of garbage and it is becoming painfully obvious that Alaskans are no exception.

Although it was common practice for years, the days are over when Panhandle communities dumped their garbage on the beach for the tide to flush away. Landfills have replaced tidal flat and ocean dumping in most southeastern towns and villages, but only a few communities have incinerators to handle the garbage problem. If there are bears in whiffing distance, garbage dumps attract them.

ARE GARBAGE BEARS DANGEROUS?

Bears at garbage dumps appear deceptively tame. They become accustomed to the scent of people who visit or work at the dump. The bears become habituated to human activity and machines used at the dump. Bears that would otherwise run at the sound of an approaching vehicle learn to recognize the sound of the garbage truck as the dinner bell. Once habituated, bears associate human beings with food instead of danger. It is not uncommon for a habituated bear in its search for food to climb into the bed of a truck or even the cab. A bear in Petersburg recently broke into a house and helped itself to a birthday cake cooling in the kitchen!

People who are not familiar with the tremendous speed and power of bears may develop a false sense of security while watching "tame" bears. Bears feeding on garbage often tend to ignore humans nearby. Such bears may permit themselves to be closely approached, providing tempting targets for photographers. Some people want the thrill of getting close to a wild animal and may even attempt to feed bears by hand. There have even been cases of people who encouraged their children to approach bears closely so that they could take a cute photo of the child with a bear. Mistaking habituated bears for "petting zoo" animals is dangerous and could have drastic consequences. More than a few photographers have been severely injured or killed trying to get close-up pictures of bears in the wild. Dump bears are no less dangerous than their non-habituated counterparts and may even be more so. A bear that has let its appetite overrule its inherent fear of humans is unpredictable. Approaching "tame" bears is courting disaster.

The desire for a good bear photo or a close look at bears has caused some people to intentionally feed them. This is illegal in Alaska. The April 1988 issue of *Flyfishing Magazine* related an incident at a lodge in interior Alaska. According to the author, "All of the edible leftovers from the gourmet meals were boated across the lake and deposited on the beach. The bears would soon gather for their evening hand-out and the guests would observe through the lodge's telescope and binoculars. It was great fun to watch the large variety of furry visitors that dropped by the dining beach during the week." Those "furry visitors" are habituated to human food and will soon become a nuisance. In all probability they will eventually have to be killed as problem bears.

ADF&G is concerned with the danger to the public that results from bears being habituated to eating garbage. We are also concerned with the number of bears now being taken in "defense of life or property" (DLP). While it is legal in Alaska to kill a bear to defend yourself or your property, the result is still a dead bear. Many DLP bears are sows with young cubs,

A PROBLEM OF PROGRESS:

Bear Conflict in Southeast Alaska

and the dependent cubs die without the guidance and protection of the sow.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, most nuisance bear problems in Southeast occurred in the vicinity of communities, government field camps, and logging camps on federal land. After the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, land ownership patterns changed and the number of bear problems rapidly increased.

ANILCA made provisions for granting large blocks of the Tongass National Forest to Native corporations seeking a profit for shareholders. The corporations began harvesting timber on Native lands in bear country and constructed new logging camps with new garbage dumps. Logging camps permitted by the U.S. Forest Service on its holdings were already creating conflicts between bears and people. Garbage dumps are sometimes near the camps, so that bears which are lured by the odor of garbage often detour to the cook shack.

The State of Alaska also received large tracts of land as a condition of the Alaska Statehood Act. Some of the lands were slated for logging, others designated as state parks, some allocated as remote homesites, and still other portions subdivided and sold through a lottery system. State subdivisions and homesites have created a new source of bear conflicts. Many of the sites which are being settled are in areas of untouched wilderness where there are few provisions for disposal of garbage. Most of the subdivisions in Southeast are adjacent to the water. Bears traditionally travel the beaches in their search for food, and conflicts between bears and residents are inevitable.

COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

Almost every community in southeast Alaska has had its share of bear problems. Bears that visit dumps invariably attract local residents and tourists who want to watch the bears or photograph them. Some communities prohibit visitors to the local dumps, while others do not. Watching the bears eat garbage in a reeking dump may be repugnant to those who have the opportunity to see bears in natural habitat but can be a treasured wildlife experience for an urban visitor. Nonresidents who arrive by tour ship or ferry may have a short time in Alaska and seeing any bear would be the highlight of the trip.

While Juneau has an incinerator instead of a dump, bears are attracted to the garbage cans in residential areas. In the summer of 1987, ADF&G trapped bears and attempted to dissuade bears from visiting town by "thumping" them with rubber bullets. Still, some bears had to be destroyed. From June through October 1987, 14 black bears were killed in Juneau. Five of these were taken by citizens in residential neighborhoods, and nine were killed by Juneau police officers or by ADF&G personnel.

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To monitor problem animals and to follow their movements in response to aversive conditioning such as rubber bullets or chemical repellents, ADF&G biologists captured a number of Juneau bears and fitted them with radio-collars and ear tags. Of the 12 bears collared in 1987-88, 10 were transported a short distance away from suburban capture sites and released. The other two, a pair of 8-month-old cubs, were fitted with radios and released in the area where they were trapped in the hope that they would reunite with the sow.

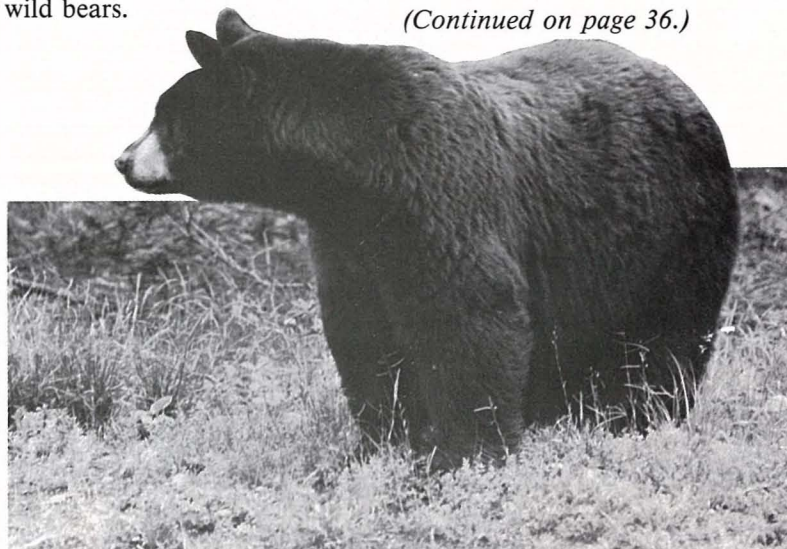
Many of the tagged and collared animals returned, in some cases to the very garbage cans at which they were captured. This proved to be fatal for three of the bears, including the two cubs which were shot by irate residents shortly after the cubs were released. Only one of the bears, a young female, travelled any distance from the area. When last located, she had settled into a more natural existence some 20 miles north of Juneau. Bears collared late in the fall of 1988 were tracked to winter dens. We will continue to track them to determine whether they return to Juneau garbage cans in 1989.

It has long been ADF&G policy to destroy nuisance bears, and when the problems are few, the policy has proved to be workable. Destroying bears eliminates the nuisance but may not be the option that ADF&G or the public prefers. If there are 10 to 20 bears causing problems, it may not be acceptable to kill them all. The low reproductive rate of brown bears, for example, means that removing too many problem animals could have dire effects on the population.

SHOULD WE TRANSPLANT?

Trapping and transplanting bears is one alternative to destroying them, but it is time-consuming, expensive, and often ineffective. Tranquilized bears can be moved by any transportation means including boats, vehicles, and aircraft. The major difficulty is finding a home for the trapped bears. While a zoo or game park might be a logical place for habituated animals, bears reproduce readily in captivity, and few zoos need wild bears.

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Leonard Lee Rue

Bears in Conflict

(Continued from page 33.)

The expense and ineffectiveness of transplanting bears that were likely to return to the area where they were trapped precipitated the nuisance bear destruction policy of ADF&G. Years of experience in southeast Alaska have demonstrated that some black bears have a strong attachment to feeding areas and remarkable homing ability if transported away from the site.

One male black bear trapped by biologists at the Petersburg landfill was flown over saltwater to the mainland by helicopter, but returned in nine days, covering a distance of 18 airline miles. Two other males trapped at the Petersburg dump took 21 days and 15 days, respectively, to return to the dump. Each bear had to swim Frederick Sound, which is over seven miles wide at the narrowest point. They seemed to have enjoyed the experience and were last seen filling out frequent flyer applications.

Another black bear that was raiding garbage cans in Petersburg was radio-collared and transported to the end of the Mitkof Highway at Mile 37. When the bear was finally relocated, it had made its way across the 17 miles of Sumner Strait to the Wrangell city dump where it became a permanent resident, to the delight of Petersburgers and the chagrin of Wrangellites.

Aside from the ineffectiveness and expense, moving garbage-habituated bears to other locations in southeast Alaska raises other problems. For example, what is the effect of introducing strange bears into habitat where bears already exist and have established home ranges? Are the new bears absorbed into the population, or are they killed by the local bears? Do they attack or displace bears already there? We don't yet have answers to these important questions.

Habituated bears will use a man-made food source whenever they can get it. If transplanted bears find a human food source at the new location, the problem has not been solved; it has been moved. These consequences must be carefully weighed before transplanting bears.

JOINT ACTION PLAN

ADF&G and the Alaska Department of Public Safety have helped develop a plan for solid waste management in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. The latter two agencies have the authority to stipulate conditions on solid waste disposal permits on most of the lands in the Panhandle. All of the agencies want to reduce garbage-related bear problems in Southeast.

The joint policy lists many strategies to be used to help accomplish the objective of reducing the loss of bears because of nuisance problems. Of these, replacing landfill garbage dumps with fuel-fired incinerators is seen by the agencies as the most effective. The installation and use of incinerators has already reduced the nuisance bear problem in some locations, but there are still many communities and camps that do not have incinerators. Incinerators are expensive but effective in reducing bear conflicts and other environmental problems associated with garbage dumps.

Another important strategy is making people aware of the consequences of habituating bears to human food. Everyone

who visits Alaska or who has the privilege of living here should be aware that "GARBAGE KILLS BEARS." It was with those three words that the ADF&G and the City of Juneau recently launched an educational effort aimed at reducing the number of bear-human conflicts in the capital city. A television, radio, and newspaper advertising campaign emphasized the human garbage aspects of the problem. The loss of a rare glacier bear, an unusual color phase of the black bear, helped to focus public attention on the problem. The glacier bear, after becoming a nuisance in Juneau, was trapped by ADF&G biologists and sent to the Anchorage zoo.

Tougher garbage containment ordinances have been passed and are being more strictly enforced. The educational effort and subsequent improvement in garbage storage by the public may be partly responsible for a decrease in bear complaints recorded this past year. The number of bears that were destroyed while raiding garbage containers dropped from 14 in 1987 to 6 in 1988—a statistic that still needs improvement. We have made some progress toward a solution to Juneau's bear-garbage problem but we are not out of the woods yet (or perhaps we should say "the bears are not all back in the woods yet").

Wild brown bears are now extinct in most of the lower 48 states, and the range of the black bears has been greatly reduced. Surely there is room in Alaska for both people and bears. It is asking too much of the bears to change their millennia-old habits; but through a conscious change in human attitudes and habits, Alaska can continue to maintain its wild bear populations for a long time to come.

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This logo is starting to be exhibited on the boxes of handguns, sporting rifles, shotguns, ammunition and archery equipment used in hunting. It signifies that a 10 or 11 percent manufacturers' excise tax was collected under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program or the Pittman-Robertson Act (P-R) as it is commonly called. These funds are collected by the Federal Government and apportioned back to the states through a formula based on each state's geographic area and the number of paid hunting license holders in the state. Alaska receives 5 percent of the revenues collected each year—the maximum allowed any state.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game uses these funds to help restore, conserve, manage and enhance our wild birds and mammals for the public benefit. In addition, we use these funds to educate hunters to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to be responsible hunters.

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