

MINIMIZING BLACK BEAR PROBLEMS AT NEW YORK STATE PUBLIC CAMPGROUNDS¹

John O'Pezio and Stephen H. Clarke, New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Wildlife Resources Center, Delmar, New York 12054-9767; and Gary B. Will, New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Ray Brook, New York 12977

INTRODUCTION

The black bear's omnivorous foraging behavior has been both beneficial and detrimental to its coexistence with modern humans. The ability to feed on a variety of animal and vegetable matter, alive or dead, has been advantageous to the black bear's survival as its range has diminished. Although black bears have an innate aversion to people, many have learned to tolerate humans to acquire easily obtainable high energy concentrated artificial foods. Human carelessness in the storage and disposal of foods within or near bear habitat has resulted in conflicts between campers and wild bears. Forest Preserve public campgrounds create a unique situation by concentrating people and food in remote forested environments frequented by black bears. The failure to effectively deal with this situation resulted in chronic bear-human problems at approximately one-third of New York's Forest Preserve public campgrounds. In addition to loss of food, some people suffered property damage and a few sustained physical injuries. Alleviation of bear nuisance activity typically included attempts to capture and relocate bothersome bears. The high cost and ultimate failure of this approach led to the destruction of many bears while little long-term improvement was achieved.

The Department of Environmental Conservation operates 49 public campgrounds on the Forest Preserve land in the Adirondack and Catskill Regions of New York. Annually, public campgrounds and other interior recreational facilities (e.g., hiking trails and canoe routes) attract many people to bear range. These campgrounds annually support approximately 1.2 million camper-days of overnight use and about one-half million day users (Anonymous 1983). Recent information suggests that the number of people using public campgrounds and the back country is growing again after a period of reduction and stabilization in the mid and late 1970's (Clarke 1982). Attendance data indicates that public campground visitation increased approximately two percent between 1982 and 1983 (Fuller 1983).

The Adirondack and Catskill Regions also contain approximately 27,500 square kilometers of black bear habitat and support populations with a combined total of about 4,000 black bears. The demand for future camping opportunities at public campgrounds will necessitate that strict sanitary codes be maintained so that bear-camper conflicts can be minimized.

THE PROBLEM

The destruction of personal property and the occurrence and threat of physical injury by black bears persisted for many years at New York's Forest Preserve public campgrounds. The underlying causes of bear-camper problems were: refuse deposited in garbage cans at or near the individual campsites; food stored in tents, screened enclosures or unprotected coolers; food scraps burned in fireplaces or dumped on the ground; intentional baiting of bears for observation and/or amusement and garbage dumps in the vicinity of public campgrounds. These sanitation problems, along with camper ignorance of black bear behavior, were recognized as basic causes of bear problems at public campgrounds for many years. The solutions to these problems had been repeatedly proposed but spuriously implemented.

Bear problems at public campgrounds were not unique to New York. Information from several federal, state and provincial agencies indicates that many similar problems have occurred throughout much of the black bear's range (Will 1980). Implementation of sanitary procedures and camper educational programs is often accompanied by a substantial reduction in bear problems.

In 1979 the Division of Fish and Wildlife and the Division of Operations (the organizational element responsible for public campgrounds management) began preparation of the Policy on Minimizing Bear Problems at Public Campgrounds. This policy, adopted by the Department in 1980, is predicated upon a program of problem prevention, public education and uniformity of response.

THE POLICY

The Policy on Minimizing Bear Problems at Public Campgrounds formally identified the causes and solutions to the long-standing bear-camper problem (Anonymous 1980a). It stated that the minimization and perhaps elimination of bear-camper problems

¹ A contribution of Federal Aid in Fish and Wildlife Restoration Project W-89-R-27: Job II-2

could be effectively accomplished through the adoption of preventive management practices rather than through the alleviation of specific bear problem incidents.

Forest Preserve public campgrounds are operated in a manner to assure a pleasant camper experience which is compatible with a wild forest environment. To assure this the policy identified five basic concepts that guide its implementation. They are:

1. Wildlife are an integral part of the forest environment and observations of wildlife in their habitats should enrich the outdoor recreation experience at public campgrounds.
2. Education efforts at campgrounds will be directed to increase campers' awareness and appreciation of both the forest wildlife and the importance of following campground regulations to insure an enjoyable wildlife experience compatible with the Forest Preserve.
3. Campground regulations and management procedures will be implemented to minimize the likelihood of conflicts with wildlife including black bears.
4. Progressive measures will be taken to address individual problem black bear incidents, in order of seriousness.
5. Joint efforts between Bureau of Wildlife and Bureau of Recreation and Field Operations will be maintained to insure full implementation of this policy.

PROCEDURES

The policy identified three procedural components that are essential to the successful reduction of the frequency and severity of bear-camper problems. They are campground management, camper education, and handling bear problems. Procedure details are enumerated in the Implementation Plan for the Policy on Minimizing Bear Problems at Public Campgrounds (Anonymous 1980b).

CAMPGROUND MANAGEMENT

1. Centralized bear-proof garbage dumpsters will replace individual campsite garbage cans. They will be maintained in a clean operational state at all times. All campers shall be instructed to take their garbage to these centralized containers at least after the evening meal each day.
2. Existing garbage disposal landfills at public campgrounds will be covered daily until they can be eliminated.
3. Campers shall be prohibited from feeding, baiting, approaching or annoying bears.
4. Campers not adhering to bear-related regulations may be expelled from the campground.

CAMPER EDUCATION

1. Revised campground brochures and signs will be developed and distributed.
2. Campers will receive a copy of the campground brochure along with a verbal reminder to read this material.
3. Campground guidelines and regulations will be displayed in prominent places within each campground.
4. A Conservation Education Interpretive Program incorporating black bear management information, will be developed and implemented.
5. Campers using primitive campgrounds will receive special recommendations for the storage of food and refuse.

HANDLING BEAR PROBLEMS

1. Bear problem incidents will be investigated, documented and reported. Specific remedial action will be recommended and implemented.
2. A culvert trap will be employed to capture problem bears as warranted.
3. Under exceptional problem situations, all or part of the campground may be closed to facilitate cleanup and capture of the problem bear(s).
4. Alternative capture and repel methods will be employed after capture has been attempted with a culvert trap, or under very exceptional situations.
5. Captured bears will be relocated, as soon as possible after capture, to a site specified by the Regional Wildlife Unit.
6. A problem bear may be killed by a Department employee only when the bear is observed in the act of chasing or injuring a person.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Policy on Minimizing Bear Problems at Public Campgrounds was adopted by the Department of Environmental Conservation during the spring of 1980. Implementation of the policy began immediately; however, budget limitations and the logistical difficulties prevented full implementation from being achieved prior to the 1980 camping season. During the three ensuing years nearly complete implementation of the policy has been achieved at all campgrounds. One notable exception has been the failure to install centralized dumpsters at all Adirondack public campgrounds. The cost of packer trucks used to empty the dumpsters and the wide separation of campgrounds from each other and the dumping sites has delayed full implementation of the plan. Fiscal plans for 1984-85 include adequate funding to install centralized garbage dumpsters at all public campgrounds that occur within New York's black bear range.

The average number of bear-related complaints recorded during the five years preceding adoption of the policy was less than during the three years following its implementation (27 and 37 respectively). However, the documentation of bear-related campground problems was less systematic prior to the adoption of the policy than after its implementation; data collected prior to 1980 only represents a minimum number of complaints rather than the actual number. Based upon this assumption and the subjective evaluations of campground supervisory personnel that the bear-related campground problems had dramatically declined, it appears that the implementation of the policy effectively reduced the frequency and perhaps the severity of bear-related conflicts at public campgrounds. Furthermore, the annual frequency of bear-related conflicts declined during each of the three summers following implementation, or remained at zero, at 47 of the 49 public campgrounds administered by the Department of Environmental Conservation. This trend may be the best available means of evaluating the effectiveness of the policy and its implementation.

Since the policy was adopted, the expenditure of Department staff time in cleaning campgrounds following bear-campground foraging in addition to the time needed to capture and relocate problem bears, has dramatically declined. Establishment of this policy has enabled campground personnel to enforce strict sanitary guidelines and satisfy complainants that efforts to deal with problem bears were being made. In addition to the reduction in actual complaints, the policy has improved the Department's relationship with the camping clientele.

LITERATURE CITED

- Anonymous. 1980a. Policy on minimizing bear problems at public campgrounds. N.Y.S. Dept. of Environ. Cons. (mimeo).
- . 1980b. Implementation plan for the policy on minimizing bear problems at public campgrounds. N.Y.S. Dept. of Environ. Cons. (mimeo).
- . 1983. Recreation operations and ski center annual report April 1, 1982-March 31, 1983. N.Y.S. Dept. of Environ. Cons. (mimeo).
- Clarke, Stephen H. 1982. Black bears and campers. *The Conservationist* 36(6):12-16.
- Fuller, Frank. 1983. Personal communication.
- Will, Gary B. 1980. Black bear human conflicts and management considerations to minimize and correct these problems. Fifth Eastern Black Bear Workshop, Wrightville Beach, N.C. March 17-20, 1980. p. 75-87.