

Texas Black Bears

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Ursus americanus

"When Bear Lost Fire" from Texas Indian Myths and Legends by Jane Archer

Bear roamed through thick forests, eating sweet honey from bee hives, fishing in rushing streams, and sleeping through long winters in deep, warm caves. Strong and powerful, Bear owned Fire.

Bear carried Fire everywhere, but one day Bear grew distracted by an abundance of tasty acorns. Bear set Fire on the ground, then gobbled up acorns with no thought to Fire. Soon Fire burned low and grew afraid, for Bear moved farther away under ancient trees, tossing acorns into massive jaws. "Help me!" Fire tried to burn brighter but with no success. Bear didn't hear, having spotted a beehive. Thoughts of a thick yellow comb dripping with sticky sweetness danced in Bear's head. Copyright, 2000, Jane Archer

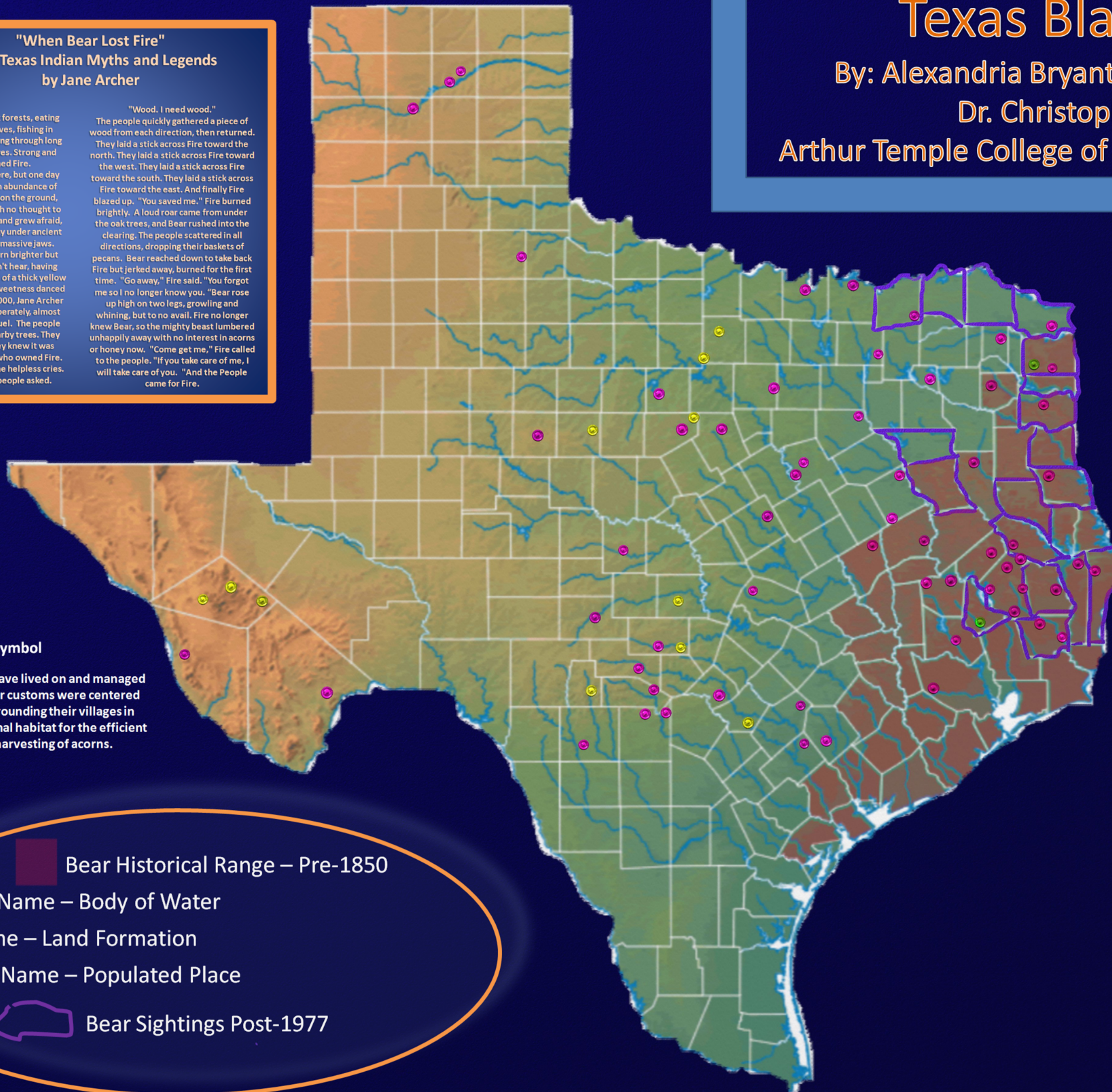
"Feed me!" Fire called desperately, almost extinguished from lack of fuel. The people gathered pecans under nearby trees. They heard Fire cry out, but they knew it was dangerous to go near Bear who owned Fire. Still they could not ignore the helpless cries. "What do you eat?" the people asked.

"Wood. I need wood." The people quickly gathered a piece of wood from each direction, then returned. They laid a stick across Fire toward the north. They laid a stick across Fire toward the west. They laid a stick across Fire toward the south. They laid a stick across Fire toward the east. And finally Fire blazed up. "You saved me." Fire burned brightly. A loud roar came from under the oak trees, and Bear rushed into the clearing. The people scattered in all directions, dropping their baskets of pecans. Bear reached down to take back Fire but jerked away, burned for the first time. "Go away," Fire said. "You forgot me so I no longer know you." Bear rose up high on two legs, growling and whining, but to no avail. Fire no longer knew Bear, so the mighty beast lumbered unhappily away with no interest in acorns or honey now. "Come get me," Fire called to the people. "If you take care of me, I will take care of you." And the People came for Fire.



Alabama – Coushatta Fire Symbol

The Alabama-Coushatta Indians have lived on and managed land in East Texas since 1803. Their customs were centered around the burning of forests surrounding their villages in order to maintain early successional habitat for the efficient hunting of white-tailed deer and harvesting of acorns.



Bear Historical Range – Pre-1850

Place Name – Body of Water

Place Name – Land Formation

Place Name – Populated Place

Bear Sightings Post-1977

Introduction

One way to promote conservation efforts in an area is to bring awareness of the connections our society has with the animal that is under threat. Black Bears were once abundant throughout Texas, but through hunting and habitat loss, the bears had been eliminated from Texas by the 1950's. The placing of the Louisiana subspecies as threatened under The Federal Endangered Species Act in 1992 allowed populations to recover in Louisiana, and there have been several sightings in East Texas since. The face of Texas has been forever altered by the presence of black bears. From the forests of East Texas to the peak of West Texas' Bear Mountain, black bears left their legacy in the form of landmarks named by settlers and Native Americans alike.

Methods

Using a random number generator, 75 place names featuring the word "Bear" were plotted on a Texas map, including populated places, streams, and land formations. The historical range of Black Bears was overlaid (in red), showing the counties where bears had existed pre-1850. The counties outlined in purple represent bear sightings post-1977, after the 1964-67 release of 161 bears in Minnesota by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

After comparing the number of places named "Bear" which fell within or near the Bears' historical range, it was found that 41.3% of all place-names were contained in the eastern 1/5 of the state. Thus, bear-related place names were disproportionately located in the species' former range, showing a strong relationship between the physical presence of bears and the names of towns, creeks and valleys located in their habitat.

References

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Photo credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (<http://www.fws.gov/>)

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