

Avoiding the blame game in managing problem black bears

MICHAEL L. WOLFE, Department of Wildland Resources, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322-5230, USA michael.wolfe@usu.edu

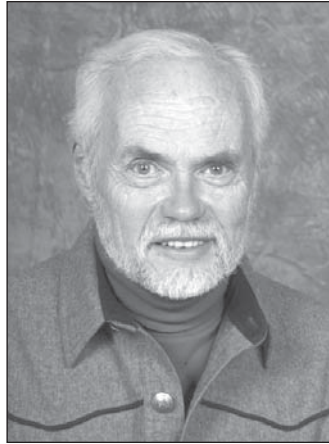
IN JUNE 2007 a black bear (*Ursus americanus*) took an 11-year-old boy from the tent in which he was sleeping at a semi-wilderness campsite in the Uinta National Forest in Utah and killed him. The offending bear, a 381-pound adult male, subsequently was destroyed by personnel of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services. The tragic incident, raises the number of recorded human fatalities caused by black bears during the period 1900–2007 to about 52. Although deaths caused by large carnivores are rare, the media attention associated with them focuses public concern for the responsibility of state and federal agencies for informing or shielding the public from hazards posed by wild animals on public lands. One *ad hoc* poll of the incident in Utah suggested that many people believed that the U.S. Forest Service should have done more to warn campers of the danger, including alerting them of a previous incident by the bear that was responsible for the boy's death. Other people even have suggested that the campground should have been closed to the public.

My own research deals with cougars (*Puma concolor*) rather than bears, but the issues surrounding bear and cougar attacks are strikingly similar. Simply stated, human incursions into or encroachment upon wildlife habitat for recreational or residential purposes carry with them certain risks. Human fatalities caused by large carnivores such as black bears and cougars are exceedingly rare, averaging <1 death per year (Beier 1990, Floyd 1999, Hererro 2002). Deaths due to a spate of hazards associated with outdoor activities (e.g., bee stings, spider bites, dog bites, and lightning strikes) occur with far greater frequencies. Yet, when wildlife attacks do occur, they become high profile and often

attract an inordinate degree of media attention, possibly resulting in an amplification of risk perception by the public (Gore et al. 2005). This is due, in part, to a culturally ingrained fear and loathing of large carnivores in western society (Kellert et al. 1996).

Black bear populations in North America are increasing, albeit at varying rates in different jurisdictions (Garshelis and Hristienko 2006). The trend, coupled with increasing encroachment of humans into wildland habitats, both for residential and recreational purposes, carries greater probability for bear–human interactions. Unlike incidents with brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) in which maternal protection of cubs is frequently responsible for potentially fatal encounters, most incidents with black bears involve animals investigating or habituating to food items and trash associated with humans. In the western United States this situation is exacerbated in drought years when shortages of natural foods force bears to seek alternate foods in human-dominated landscapes. This notwithstanding, Rogers (1992), who has researched black bears for 40 years, concluded that a miniscule fraction of an estimated population of 750,000 black bears in North America is naturally predatory.

Both state wildlife agencies and the U.S. Forest Service operate within the parameters of official protocols that define their activities when dealing with potentially dangerous animals, such as cougars and bears. The details of policies relating to black bear incidents differ among states, but most of them feature the common element of a multi-tiered classification of problem animals, be they either in residential or wildland areas. The categories are based on the animal's level of (1) habituation to humans, (2) bold or aggressive behavior, (3) damage



Michael L. Wolfe

to property, and (4) potential threat to human safety.

Utah's policy is typical of those in several western states (Utah Division of Wildlife Resources 2005, unpublished report). It categorizes bears into several levels. Level 1 bears are generally animals that have strayed into contact with human activities but are not habituated to humans and have caused no property damage. The policy recognizes that shortages of natural foods, especially in drought years, can result in increased interactions as bears seek alternative foods. Corrective measures for Level 1 bears typically involve removal of attractants, as well as nonlethal means, such as hazing (with dogs) and aversive conditioning by shooting the animals with rubber slugs or other projectiles. In some instances, an animal may be captured and relocated to remote areas. Level 2 bears are animals that exhibit continued unacceptable behaviors, but pose no immediate threat to property, public safety, or livestock. These bears typically have become habituated to humans, and frequently they previously have been captured and relocated. Corrective measures generally include those applied to Level 1 animals, i.e., removal of attractants (food and trash) and, additionally, in some cases, temporary closure of campgrounds. Licensed hunters are sometimes used to remove Level 2 bears. Level 3 bears are chronic or acute offenders or have caused significant property damage or pose a significant threat to human safety. Corrective action in these situations dictates that the offending animal be destroyed. An important consideration is that policy provides some degree of discretion to agency personnel with respect to categorization of nuisance animals and the decision for appropriate corrective action. As with any other management activity, human decisions are not infallible.

Pertaining to the recent incident in Utah, a bear (assumed to be the perpetrating animal) had molested other campers the previous morning. The animal had torn open a camper's tent, but was driven off. After the incident was reported to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), agency personnel decided pursuant to division policy to destroy the bear, and a team of experienced houndsmen were sent to kill the offending animals. Unfortunately, their pursuit of the animal proved unsuccessful

when the hounds lost its scent in the heat of the day. My knowledge of bear behavior indicates that an animal that has been pursued and harassed by hounds and humans for the better part of a day would be extremely unlikely to return to the site of the first encounter.

Still, there remains the question of whether the U.S. Forest Service should have closed the developed campground in question or posted specific warnings at the remote campsite. Ample signage exists in the general area to warn campers of the presence of black bears and to advise appropriate behavior to minimize the risk of potentially aggressive encounters with the animals. These general observations raise the question of how site-specific warnings about potential wildlife hazards must be, particularly when the majority of campers are inured to such warnings. As an example, I pose an analogous hypothetical scenario. We know that vehicle collisions with deer and elk pose potentially fatal risks for motorists. To counter this threat, warning signs are posted along stretches of highway with a high prevalence of such collisions. However, because the perceived frequency of such collisions is low, most motorists do not heed the warnings. Suppose that a fatal accident occurs within one of these marked stretches. Is it the responsibility of the UDWR or the Utah Department of Transportation (the keeper of the highway) to inform motorists that a specific fatal incident occurred at precisely that spot?

A larger philosophical question underlies this issue. To what degree is a governmental agency responsible for sterilizing the outdoor experience of all potentially fatal but highly improbable hazards, such as venomous snakes or even lightning strikes? Arguably, a small but real risk of such hazards is part of the allure of a wilderness camping experience. To cleanse the surroundings completely of all the natural hazards would tend to destroy a good part of the very attraction that draws visitors in the first place. Alternatively, we can shield ourselves in the cocoon of a metal RV in a developed campground. At an extreme, management agencies can prohibit camping in remote locations where even a miniscule possibility of danger from any hazard exists. Do we really want that?

The reality is that governmental agencies can warn campers only of the general threats

posed by wild animals at a given location and take measures to eliminate carefully identified problem animals. In the case of the recent bear attack in Utah, both these requirements were met. In the final analysis, UDWR and U.S. Forest Service are no more accountable for this tragic incident than the Utah Geological Survey can be held responsible for the damage wrought by the next major earthquake or its inability to predict the precise occurrence of that event.

So, we should refrain from the blame game and the inevitable specter of litigation. Instead, let's take the initiative to learn more about the wildlife with which we share our environment. While the incident is unquestionably tragic, we must still balance the scales. Some risk (however small) is inherent to any outdoor activity. To attempt to assign blame to agencies that function, in part, to allow us to experience the natural world around us only deepens the sadness of this incident.

Acknowledgments

I thank the following persons for their inciteful review of this piece: my daughter K. Wolfe, M. Muffoletto, and K. Bunnell. *

Literature cited

- Beier, P. 1991. Cougar attacks on humans in the United States and Canada. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 19:403–412.
- Garshelis, D.L., and H. Hristienko. 2006. State and provincial estimates of American black bear numbers versus assessments of population trend. *Ursus* 17:1–7.
- Gore, M. L., W. F. Siemer, J. E. Shanahan, D. Scheufele, and D. J. Decker. 2005. Effects on risk perception of media coverage of a black bear-related human fatality. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 33:507–516.
- Hererro, S. 2002. *Black bear attacks: their causes and avoidance*. Revised edition. Lyons, New York, New York, USA.
- Kellert, S. R., M. Black, C. R. Rush, and A. J. Bath. 1996. Human culture and large carnivore conservation in North America. *Conservation Biology* 10:977–990.
- Rogers, L. L. 1992. *Watchable wildlife: the black bear*. U.S. Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA.
-

MICHAEL L. WOLFE is a professor of wildlife science in Utah State University's Department of Wildland Resources (College of Natural Resources) and a certified wildlife biologist. Previously, he worked as mammals coordinator for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. He has studied cougars in the Intermountain West for 15 years.