

## Bear's fate sealed long before attack

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**There really is no safe way for black bears to co-exist with humans, except in a zoo. Bears have their habitat, humans have theirs. When the two habitats merge or intersect, there can be trouble.**

The black bear that attacked a man in Gatlinburg last week is generating a lot of sympathy. The human victim, who is lucky to be alive, has been accused of provoking the attack by trying to photograph the bear and her cubs and of not taking proper care of his dog, which apparently went after the bear. All of that may be true, but the genesis of the attack appears to be that somebody had been making food and garbage too easily obtained by bears, causing the bears to venture too close to where humans live.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is not a zoo. While many visitors to this area love to see the bears and get as close as they can to them, in fact wildlife experts warn against it. Not only is it potentially dangerous to humans, it changes the habits of bears and makes them too dependent on people. The Park has spent a lot of time and money to educate visitors about this. Rangers empty the picnic areas before dark so workers can go in and make sure there is no trash and leftover food around that might entice bears into an area frequented by people.

Some of those who own and operate cabins and lodges on the outskirts of the Park have been guilty of trying to lure bears with food so their guests can see them. That changes the bears from the wild animals they inherently are to animals that depend on the misplaced generosity of strangers. And that's when danger can result.

It is a shame the bear that attacked the human must be hunted down and killed. It is a distasteful and avoidable action to those who sympathize with the bear and see it as the real victim. But when bears that live in the wild are drawn into areas where people congregate so they can eat food and garbage intentionally or unintentionally left behind for them, the result can be tragic for the bears and the people they encounter.

The balance of nature is a fragile, delicate thing. Bears must maintain their instinct for the wild. They must be encouraged to stay away from people. And people must be made to respect this balance by not doing things that can draw bears out of their natural habitat.

The bear's death sentence began when someone began to feed it, a state wildlife officer said of what happened in Gatlinburg. He's right. The end result - the eventual putting down of the bear that attacked the man - makes nobody happy. But maybe it will force some hardheaded people to respect the rules of nature.