

Bear-Proofing Garbage cans near Great Smoky Mountains National Park

By Kim Delozier

Black bear population density at Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee and North Carolina) is one of the highest in the eastern United States, and visitation to the park exceeds 10 million people annually. This situation increases the likelihood of bear-human conflicts. Reducing a bear's access to human food and garbage is a priority for park resource managers. In recent years the park has made several improvements in bear management. These include incorporating animal-proof dumpsters, modification of work schedules for maintenance personnel, earlier closures of picnic areas, installation of food-storage cables in backcountry campsites, development of educational materials, and increased monitoring of bear activity in developed areas.

During 1999, park staff worked with Gatlinburg city officials, state biologists, and private individuals to develop an ordinance for mandatory animal-resistant garbage containers in areas of Gatlinburg that are adjacent to the park. Bears were becoming "garbage-conditioned" when they crossed the park boundary and were creating problems in both the city and the park. Bears in the city of Gatlinburg are not new; a bear task force was established for Gatlinburg in 1988 to address this issue. City officials, however, repeatedly voted down the proposed ordinance, but were finally convinced of its need by local response to the numerous bears killed (i.e., shot, poisoned, hit by vehicles) in backyards, parking lots, and trash receptacles in the city.

"The ordinance requires residents ... to 'bear-proof' their trash receptacles."

The ordinance requires residents of designated zones and managers of food-producing businesses throughout Gatlinburg to "bear-proof" their trash receptacles by 1 June 2000. The ordinance will ultimately save the lives of many park bears in addition to other wildlife. The park plans to work with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency to aggressively manage or relocate any garbage-conditioned bears that show up in Gatlinburg in spring in hopes of breaking the garbage dependency cycle passed down from females to their cubs. The next step is to work with this state agency to address the intentional feeding of bears, which is currently legal in