

Impacts of Garbage on Black Bears in Gatlinburg

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Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are a major attractant for the nearly 10 million tourists that visit the Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP) each year. Furthermore, not only are black bears ecological indicators to the health of environments, but also serve as a symbol of remaining wilderness in the eastern United States.

The benefit from black bears to Gatlinburg's economy is difficult to measure but undoubtedly significant and likely in the millions of dollars. This is clearly evident to the numerous chalets, motels, hotels, miniature golf courses, markets, restaurants, and ect that use ether the name "bear" and/or a picture of a bear(s) in their advertisement. However, despite the economic importance of bears to

Gatlinburg, many businesses and restaurants store their garbage in a manner that is environmentally insensitive and extremely detrimental to bears. In extreme cases, some businesses even intentionally feed bears to attract tourist.

The irresponsible behavior of intentional and unintentional feeding of bears results in a death trap for bears in Gatlinburg. For example, through improper storage of garbage and handouts from people, bears quickly become a nuisance and a threat to human safety. These animals eventually have to be captured and relocated to other areas. Sadly, research has shown relocated bears are often killed from either other bears, poaching, or on the highway trying to return home. Furthermore, bears that become habituated to garbage and people are more likely to be poached or harvested during hunting season.

Feeding bears in Gatlinburg has been a management dilemma for years for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA). Management objective for bears in Tennessee is simply to maintain a healthy black bear population for the enjoyment of the citizens and visitors to the area. TWRA does not consider bears raiding garbage containers and/or threatening people the elements of a healthy black bear population.



The TWRA, Great Smoky Natural History Association, and the city of Gatlinburg has teamed up in a cooperative effort and funded a position in 2002 to address the many problems with garbage and bears in Gatlinburg. Specific duties for the nuisance black bear position are:

- Professionally manage black bears in the City; this may include monitoring, aversive conditioning, capture and relocation, euthanasia, ect.
- To identify and correct sources that attracts bears into the City (i.e., improper storage of garbage, feeding, and ect).
- To provide the public and the City with technical guidance and assistance in dealing with black bears.
- To educate the public regarding laws relating to black bears, the causes of nuisance black bears, responsibility of visitors in bear habitat and to provide City residents proactive measures to deal with visiting bears.
- To enforce all laws pertaining to the management and hunting of black bears in Gatlinburg and in other areas in emergency situations.

Given the relatively large number of nuisance bears inhabiting Gatlinburg and creating a significant risk to human safety, the first phase of the project was to remove offending animals. TWRA has removed nearly 50 nuisance bears from the City in 2002 and 2003.

All parties involved have clearly benefited from the cooperative effort with the establishment of an area pro-active bear management program. Specifically, this effort has resulted in fewer human / bear conflicts, a safer environment for residents and visitors, and has allowed more flexibility for area law enforcement personnel to perform regular duties.



With the number of nuisance bears inhabiting Gatlinburg greatly reduced, the second phase of the project and long-term approach should focus on prevention, i.e., stop bears from becoming nuisance animals and a threat to humans in Gatlinburg. Management efforts should be directed on the proper containment of garbage, educating the public on the problems of bears and people in Gatlinburg, and responsible behavior

in bear habitat. This approach to managing bears is not new and has been very successful in the GSMNP. Since eliminating the access of garbage to bears inhabiting the GSMNP, very few bears have to be moved each year.

To be successful in preventing bears from becoming nuisance animals, the accessibility of garbage and birdseed and the intentional feeding of bears must be significantly reduced. To achieve these goals, enforcement of our current state law regarding the feeding of bears in Gatlinburg will be necessary.

The rewards of properly storing garbage to better manage bears in Gatlinburg will be many. By conforming to their own vision statement of being truly sensitive to the environment, the city of Gatlinburg will serve as a successful model to other cities experiencing the same difficulties with nuisance bears.