

Bear problem in Gatlinburg has improved



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The nearly 40,000 visitors a day, along with the residents of Gatlinburg, generate about 56 tons of trash each day - a potential bonanza to the bears living next door in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

However, several years ago, when it got to the point that hordes of marauding bears were scattering garbage around the streets of the city each night and becoming aggressive toward people, Gatlinburg City Commission took action.

They passed an ordinance requiring use of bear-proof garbage containers and proper storage of grease. Effective since June 1, 2000, the ordinance applies to all restaurants within the city limits and the majority of residences within the city.

The city also took the initiative to purchase about 75 bear-proof Dumpster lids for which they were later reimbursed by the businesses. In an even more proactive move, the city joined forces with the National Park and Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency to dedicate money for a wildlife officer to work specifically on bear control.

On the job now for two years, TWRA Officer Dave Brandenburg said 27 bears were removed from the city in 2003, but only one has been removed so far this year. He went on to say, "I believe we're over the hump on the bad-nuisance bears."

Nuisance bears, which had become so habituated to scavenging dumpsters that they frequented choice sites in broad daylight or became aggressive toward people, were the first to be removed.

One of the worst Brandenburg dealt with was a female moved two years ago.

"She had to be moved twice, and she was very aggressive. She ran at people in the parking lot if they came near the Dumpsters she frequented or her cubs, and she went into the picnic shelter at Twin Creeks pavilion, where she ran people off and climbed up on the tables to eat. She was also intentionally being fed by people in the area, which also created her problem," said Brandenburg.

The bear and the three cubs she had taught to scavenge were finally all moved to Ocoee Bear Sanctuary in Polk County in 2002 and have not been seen since.

"When a bear is daytime active and not fearful of people, they are dangerous. It wouldn't be that big a problem if people, primarily tourists, knew how to act around these bears, but people rush in close to get a better picture," said Brandenburg, going on to describe a 2003 incident in which a cub climbed a tree at traffic light No. 10 in Gatlinburg, and the mother guarded the base of the tree.

Besides the ensuing traffic jam, Brandenburg said at least 50 people gathered around, and many of them got within 20 to 30 feet of the distraught bear. Even warnings that the bear was capable of killing someone had little impact on the onlookers.

"Tourists ask me all the time where they can see, pet and feed bears," said Brandenburg.

Although that particular incident was serious, Brandenburg said the overall situation has improved tremendously in the past two years. "The number of bear/human encounters has been reduced, and the Gatlinburg Police have been relieved of dealing with so many bear complaints. They haven't had a bear call since Dec. 15, and that relieves the officers to do the things they need to do," he said.

While the state law that prohibits the intentional or indirect feeding of black bears imposes a fine of up to \$50 plus court costs - which are \$185 in Sevier County - Gatlinburg's law is much stiffer. Gatlinburg's ordinance allows for a fine of up to \$500, with each day that a violation occurs being considered a separate offense.

Through a combination of numerous businesses using bear-proof lids or enclosing their Dumpsters, as well as Brandenburg's removal of dozens of bears, Gatlinburg's situation has definitely improved.

However, a walking survey by The Mountain Press staff of Gatlinburg businesses in the area of Airport Road and the Parkway revealed that not everyone is committed to preventing a recurrence of past bear problems.

Of 88 Dumpsters checked, including nine Dumpsters located in enclosures, 61 had garbage that was accessible to bears. Of 19 outdoor grease containers, 16 of the containers were accessible to bears.

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