

TWRA pulls the trigger, but we furnish the ammo

November 06, 2006

I have this theory that people's compassion and love of animals is in direct proportion to how big those animals are. There is no lobby for squirrels. Puppies are cute but when people are found to have abused dogs and cats you don't see much outcry. However as you get to the big guys, that's when the passions rise.

Elephants need protecting. So do whales. Tigers have fans. Lions too. Whenever we publish a photo of a hunter cradling the horned head of a downed buck, one or two people will call in to say how appalled they are by that sight.

And bears. Wow, do bears have a following.

No subject generates reader reaction the way a bear incident does. Guess we can thank Smokey and Yogi for that. And maybe Gentle Ben. People just love bears. And they don't like it when black bears are killed for what they perceive as no good reason. Never mind that they are hunted in areas surrounding the Park. Or that they are not endangered. Or that they are wild animals that, when domesticated even a little, become vulnerable.

Fall is when the bears start to get close to humans in and around Gatlinburg and the Park. They are in search of food so they can hibernate with full stomachs. And the mother bears have their cubs in tow. It's a cute, endearing sight. But if you can see it, chances are there is a problem.

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, the national park, bear experts, wildlife experts, everyone who knows anything about black bears repeatedly warns humans not to feed them, not to leave food out to entice them, not to create situations in which bears get close to civilization and thus, in some situations, become dangerous to humans. Yet violations of this rule go on all over Gatlinburg. And there is evidence the city itself is among the biggest culprits, leaving its own garbage containers unopened or, at the very least, not bearproofed, thus attracting bears to hunt for food and be seen by tourists who covet the opportunity.

TWRA wears the black hat with black bears because its officers usually have to come in and clean up a bad situation. That can mean killing bears that threaten humans who unwittingly or intentionally come too close to a mama bear and her cubs. The idea of killing a mother and her cubs for no apparent reason other than they were seeking food and protecting themselves from an apparent threat just doesn't go over well with many people. It's as if these state agents like it when they can shoot bears dead.

There are half a million acres in the Park. With some 1,600 or so bears living there and 800 miles of hiking trails, it's possible that at certain times of the year you'll see some as you walk the woods or drive the roads through the Park. Bears don't want to be around humans. They're wild animals and are fearful of people. If the bears are left alone they'll stay away. But we have 12 million visitors a year, and many of them come here hoping to see a bear. They could see one a lot cheaper if they'd stop off at the Knoxville Zoo, but we don't want to encourage that, now do we?

The owners of the rental cabins surrounding the Park know that if they leave food out or tell their

renters to, chances are bears in the fall will come by and eat, thus giving those cherished renters a chance to see wild bears up close. Throw in the city of Gatlinburg's indifference to following its own rules about garbage containers, and bear sightings are likely.

And when a hungry bear attacks a human, officials have to step in and put down the bears that do that. Could they relocate those bears? Maybe, but do we want wildlife officials spending all their time trapping and relocating wild bears? Is that a good use of taxpayer dollars?

We all like the black bears and admire their pluck, their mannerisms and their devotion to family. But when TWRA officials have to pull the trigger and put down bears that get too close to humans, just remember it's the humans who handed them the ammo.

- Stan Voit is editor of The Mountain Press. His column appears each Sunday. He can be reached at 428-0748, ext. 217, or e-mail to svoit@themountainpress.com.