

Contact:

Thomas H. Eason
Bear Management Section
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 S. Meridian St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600
Phone (850) 413-7379
Fax (850) 921-1847
thomas.eason@fwc.state.fl.us

Florida Status Report

Introduction

Black bears in Florida continue to exist in a mosaic of 6 core, 2 remnant, and several peripheral areas that vary in size, distribution, habitat, and isolation. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) refers to the 6 core areas as the Apalachicola, Big Cypress, Eglin, Ocala, Osceola, and St Johns River bear populations and the 2 remnant areas as the Chassahowitzka and Glades/Highlands bear populations (Fig. 1). Peripheral areas with potential to hold bears include the Blackwater River State Forest, Big Bend, and Greenswamp. Core populations appear to be stable to increasing, but the smaller, remnant populations face an uncertain future because of habitat loss and fragmentation from human development. The FWC lists the black bear in Florida as threatened statewide except for those in Apalachicola National Forest and Baker and Columbia Counties, where bears were considered a game animal until seasons were closed in 1994. Since 1994, black bears retain no special status in these aforementioned areas. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) declined to list the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) as a federally threatened species, but the U.S. District Court directed the agency to re-evaluate the adequacy of existing regulations for ensuring the conservation of the subspecies. To date, no official response from the USFWS has been published.

The Bear Management Section (BMS) is responsible for planning, coordinating, and implementing bear management within the Florida. The BMS works closely with the Bureau of Wildlife Management (BWM), whose personnel responds to most human/bear conflict situations, the Office of Informational Services, whose personnel develops educational and outreach programs for bears, and the Office of Environmental Services, whose personnel handles habitat and development issues. The BMS also works with a wide array of other governmental agencies, conservation groups, and private individuals. Four full-time employees, 4 temporary employees, and 3 graduate students staff the BMS. The FWC is undertaking a comprehensive reorganization, which should be implemented in the latter half of 2003. How this reorganization will affect bear management is unclear.

Harvest Data

Hunting seasons for black bear have been closed in Florida since 1994.

Management

The FWC documented 122 and 140 bear mortalities in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Collisions with vehicles accounted for the vast majority (105 and 130) of these mortalities and set a new state record in 2002 (Fig. 2). The remaining mortalities were the result of illegal kills (5 and 4) or other causes (12 and 6). Management efforts regarding bear roadkill included coordinating with the Florida Department of Transportation, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and Defenders of Wildlife on planning, funding, and design of another crossing structure on State Road 46 in central Florida, the highest ranking chronic roadkill area in the state. Construction of the new underpass is scheduled to begin in 2003.

The FWC received 796 and 1,342 calls regarding bears in 2001 and 2002, respectively, with 2002 setting a new state record (Fig. 3). Most of these calls involved people reporting bears in their area, yard, or garbage (440 and 788), but many involved more serious situations such as bears damaging property (89 and 135), killing pets and livestock (27 and 44), in buildings (28 and 35), or threatening people (7 and 12). The BMS is finalizing completion of a Conservation Strategy for the Black Bear in Florida. Implementation of this strategy will be facilitated through local working groups for each bear area by fostering education, expediting cooperation among local stakeholders, identifying and addressing local problems and conservation opportunities, and coordinating management efforts. The first local working group has been formed for the Ocala bear population, and prework is being conducted for similar groups in the Apalachicola area and Osceola area. The BMS continues to partner with the United States Forest Service, Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club, and the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Inc. on a Be Bear Aware campaign aimed at raising awareness of bears and reducing human/bear conflicts in Florida. The BMS and BWM implemented a pilot Bear Response Agent study to assess the potential for privatizing some nuisance-bear responses required of FWC staff. This study is progressing well, with several agents fully trained and conducting site visits and capture efforts independent of FWC staff.

Research

Bear Management Section biologists continue to conduct research on bear movements and behaviors in the vicinity of State Road 40 in Ocala National Forest (ONF). This research consists of analyzing movements of radio-collared bears captured near State Road 40 and interpretation of highway crossings made by bears across a 19-kilometer dirt strip adjacent to the roadway. Information generated by this study will be used to measure potential impacts on bears from highway widening and will suggest feasibility of design features that may reduce vehicular mortality of bears along this

roadway. BMS scientists also continue to conduct research on the impacts of roads on bears throughout Florida. Field efforts focus on collecting hair samples from baited enclosures for genetic analyses. Information from this work will be used to quantify the impacts of bear highway mortality by estimating the abundance and distribution of bears in six core populations across the state. The BMS, in cooperation with the University of Florida, is investigating the rates and causes of bear cub mortality in ONF. Information from this work will provide estimates of bear productivity and cub recruitment rates that will contribute to the construction of a scientifically valid population model that will aid BMS in bear management and conservation. The BMS, in cooperation with the University of Florida, is conducting research to characterize the genetic structure of black bears in Florida, document gene flow among populations, explain gene flow in terms of landscape features, and investigate the effectiveness of lands between Osceola National Forest and ONF as a zone that genetically links the two populations. Information from this study will provide data on the effects of habitat fragmentation on bear dispersal and gene flow among populations and assist habitat conservation designed to benefit bears. Additionally, BMS is beginning work to estimate the distribution of bears within the North St. Johns River area and the abundance and movements of bears within and around the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area in Jefferson County along a portion of US 98. These studies will enable the BMS to ascertain the distribution of bears in the North St. Johns River area and the effects of vehicular mortality upon bears in the Aucilla area. The University of Kentucky continues to investigate the status and dynamics of the small remnant Chassahowitzka bear population.

Control

The FWC captured 40 and 49 bears in 2001 and 2002, respectively. The vast majority of these captures (34 and 47) were in response to nuisance situations. Twenty-seven and 37 bears were translocated and 1 and 3 bears were euthanized in 2001 and 2002, respectively. As the number and intensity of nuisance bear situations increases in Florida, and as the attractiveness of translocation diminishes, emphasis is, and will continue to be, placed on technical assistance to landowners and euthanasia of problem bears.

Overall Summary

The current focus of bear management in Florida is twofold - assessment of the current status of bear populations and abatement of human/bear conflicts. Existing research projects will provide valuable insight into the status of bears in Florida, but ongoing efforts will be needed to track future changes. Florida is home to over 16 million people and harbors growing populations of both people and bears. Although bears have rebounded from historic lows, their future remains uncertain because of increasing impacts of human development. As bear populations expand out from historic strongholds and human populations move into these same once remote areas, the wildland/suburban interface zone continues to increase. Raising peoples' awareness and

understanding of bears, coupled with implementation of efficacious solutions to human/bear conflicts, will be critical to the success of bear conservation in Florida.

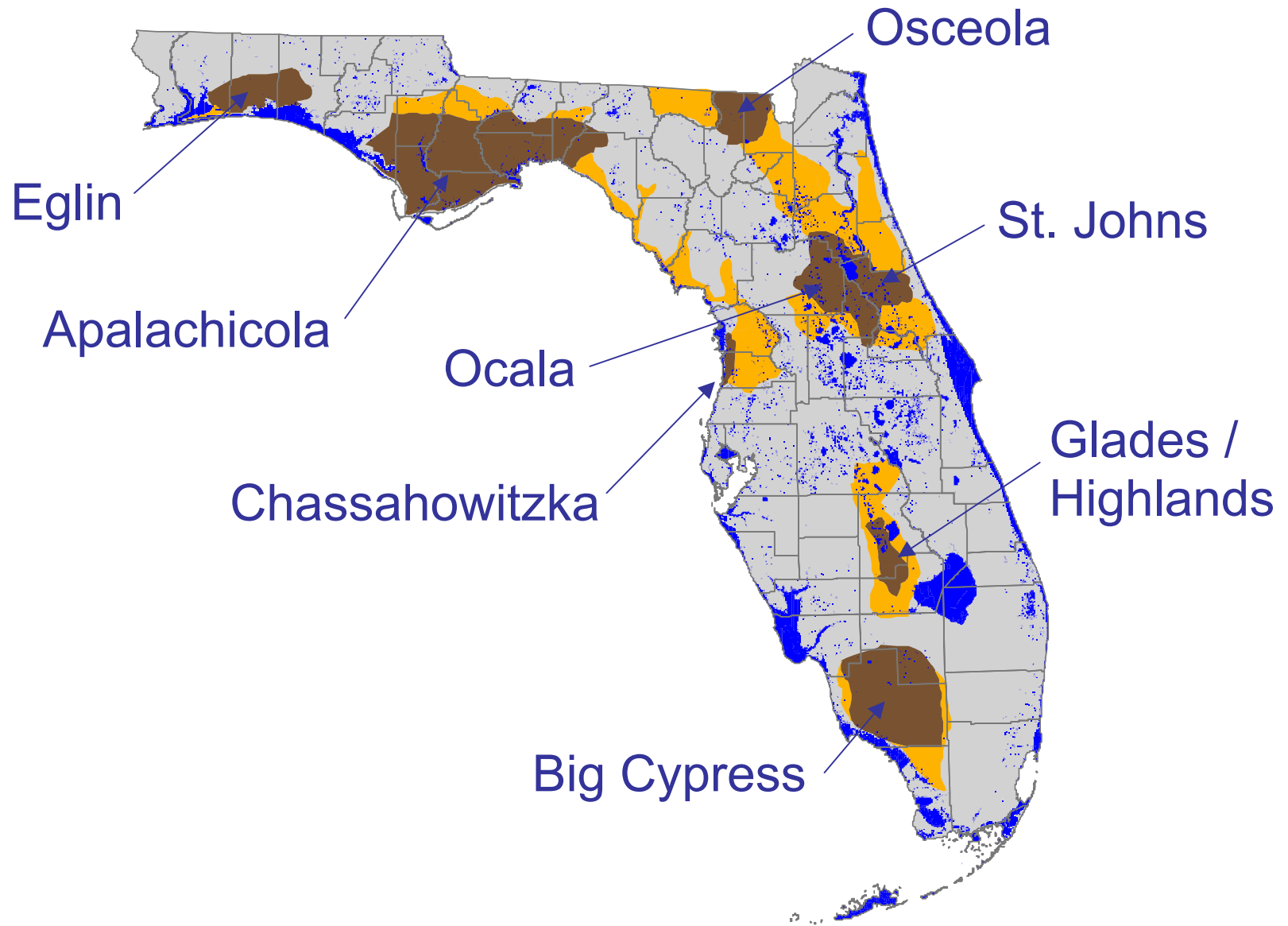


Figure 1. Names of areas with black bears in Florida.

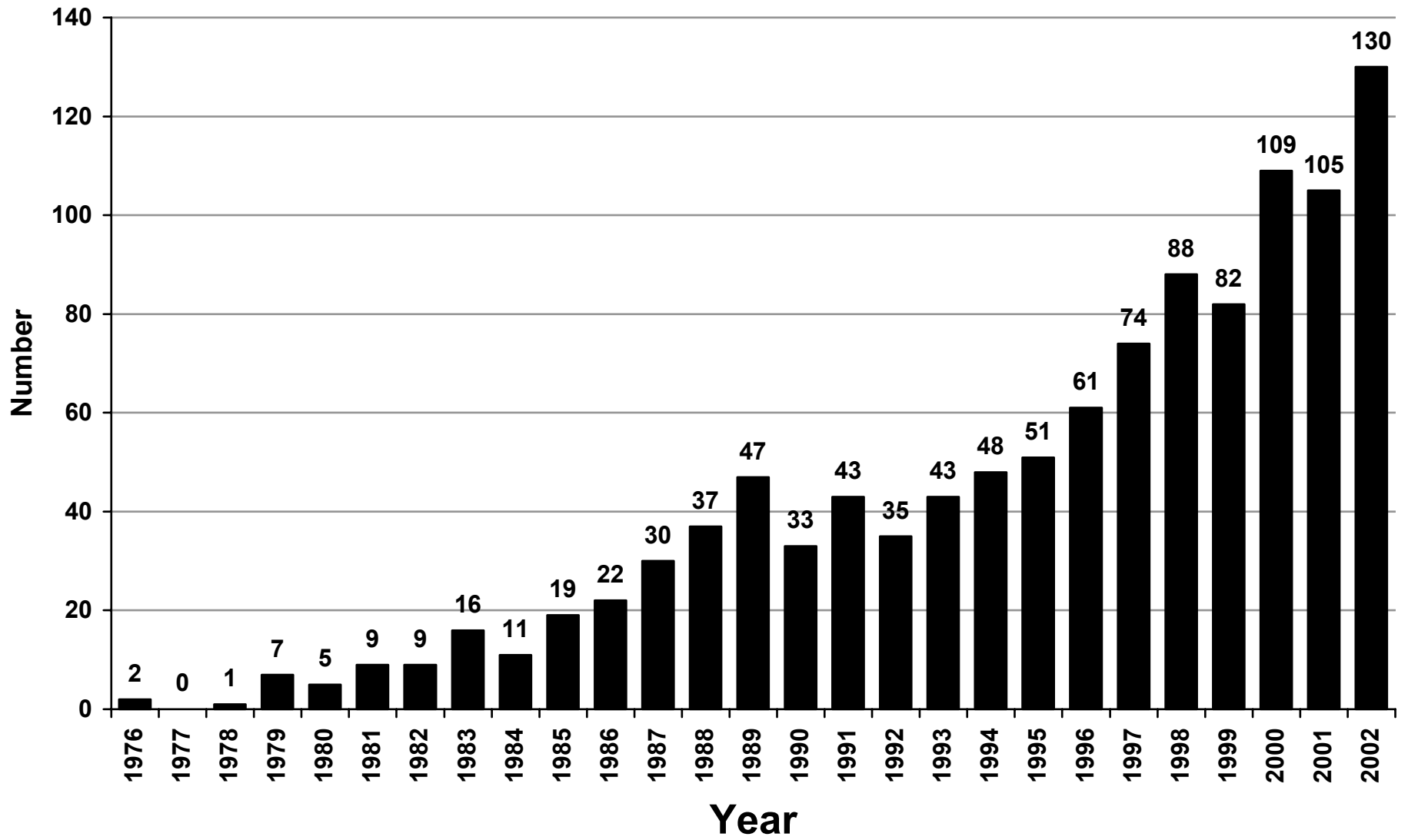


Figure 2. Number of roadkill bears in Florida.

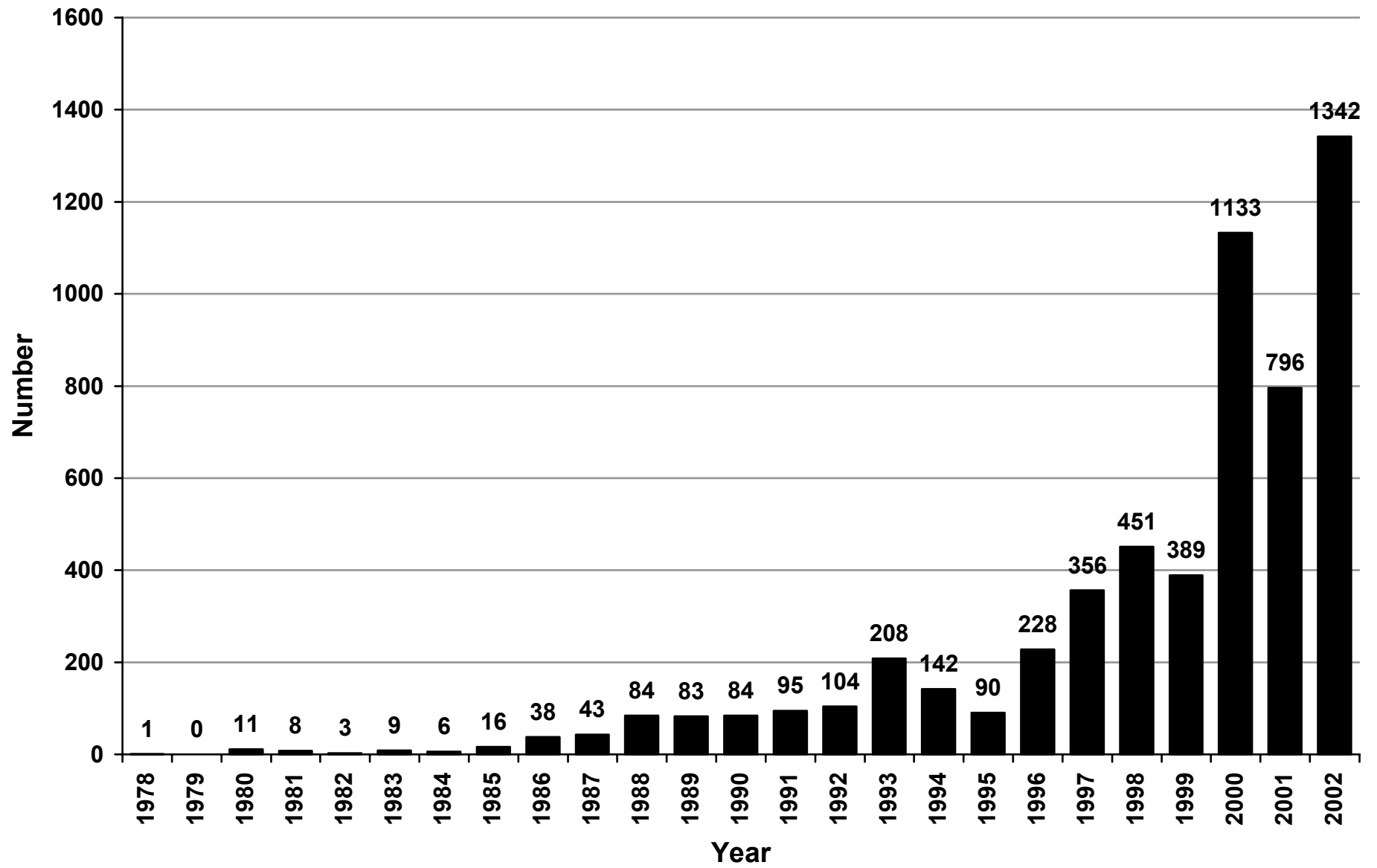


Figure 3. Number of calls regarding black bears in Florida.