

James R. Brady. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.
Wildlife Research Lab, 4005 South Main Street, Gainesville, FL
32601

Until recently Florida could still be considered a frontier. It was one of the last Eastern states to be widely occupied and altered by humans. Today, however, that situation no longer exists. Five thousand four hundred new residents move to Florida each week. It is projected that by 1990, Florida will be the fourth most populous state in the United States. The implications of this for the black bear in Florida are ominous and are reflected in the nature of our management and research activities. These include limited hunting, nuisance control, and habitat research and protection.

Black bear are classified as a threatened species in most of the state because of the trends in habitat loss. In two areas, however, where a longstanding tradition of bear hunting exists and habitat is considered relatively secure the "game" classification was retained. These areas are the Apalachicola National Forest in Northwest Florida and Columbia and Baker Counties in Northeast Florida. Statewide, the bear is widely distributed with some evidence of bear occurrence in 50 (75%) of the counties. However, a trend of population fragmentation and isolation is evident (Fig. 1).

HARVEST

Black bear may be harvested during 3 separate hunts each year. A 23—day October season is open on the Apalachicola National Forest, a special late—October 9—day season is open on the Osceola National Forest, and, during the 57—day general season (November through early January), bear may be taken throughout Columbia and Baker Counties. The use of dogs is allowed except in designated "still hunt" areas during the general season and this method accounts for most of the kill.

All bears must be presented to a check station or reported by telephone within 24—hours so that tagging and data collection can be arranged. This system has resulted in a greater proportion of the bear harvest being reported.

Harvest data from recent years are presented in Table 1. These data show a steadily increasing harvest on the Apalachicola National Forest from 1979—80 to 1984—85 which is highly correlated to the number of bear permits sold ($r = .99$). During the 1985—86 season, however, while the number of permits sold continued to rise, the harvest dropped slightly. Sex—ratio data are available for only the most recent years making analysis of long term trends impossible, but the recent high female:male ratio in the harvest from Apalachicola is a point of concern which along with total harvest will be monitored closely in the future.

Harvest totals from Columbia and Baker Counties show no discernable trends and sex ratios in the harvest do not suggest over—exploitation at this time.

MANAGEMENT

Management of Florida's bear resource includes regulating the harvest, protecting habitat, and handling nuisance bear complaints. Because fall bear hunting has such a long tradition in Florida and because of conflicts with other hunter groups the options for altering the hunting season are few and controversial so proposals must be thoroughly supported with good data. Management personnel have recently focused more attention on collecting sex, age, and total harvest data from the hunts.

As mentioned elsewhere habitat is the critical issue for the black bear in Florida. Therefore, while the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has no authority to regulate development it does actively function in an advocacy role to influence development decisions that are made which impact wildlife habitat. The

Commission routinely comments on U. S. Forest Service management plans, mining reclamation plans, and other major development proposals. In this way denials, mitigations, and modifications are secured which protect black bear habitat.

Florida's expanding human population and its role as the top honey producing state create numerous bear/human conflicts. These recurring conflicts resulted in the development of a policy to guide our response. The policy outlines a graded response which places the initial responsibility for action on the complainant and provides for an ultimate response of capturing and relocating the offending bear. The majority of complaints result from damage to apiary equipment. Studies here have shown electric fences to be very effective at deterring bears, and the nuisance bear policy requires that the beekeeper erect and maintain an electric fence as the appropriate first response. Persistent bears may be trapped and released or relocated under this policy

RESEARCH

Currently black bear studies are focused primarily on habitat and range requirements, hibernation, and population census and/or index methods. Until recently field work was conducted on the Osceola National Forest, however, poor trapping success prompted a move to the Ocala National Forest in 1985. During the spring through fall, 24 captures of 17 individual bears were made. At this time, however, only 8 bears are being tracked. In four instances radio-collars were dropped when the break-away mechanism activated prematurely.

In addition to live captured bears 15—20 road-killed animals are handled each year. Data on reproduction, age, diseases and parasites, food habits, and in the case of very fresh specimens, serum chemistry values are collected. Additionally, tissues and serum samples are being stored for future studies.

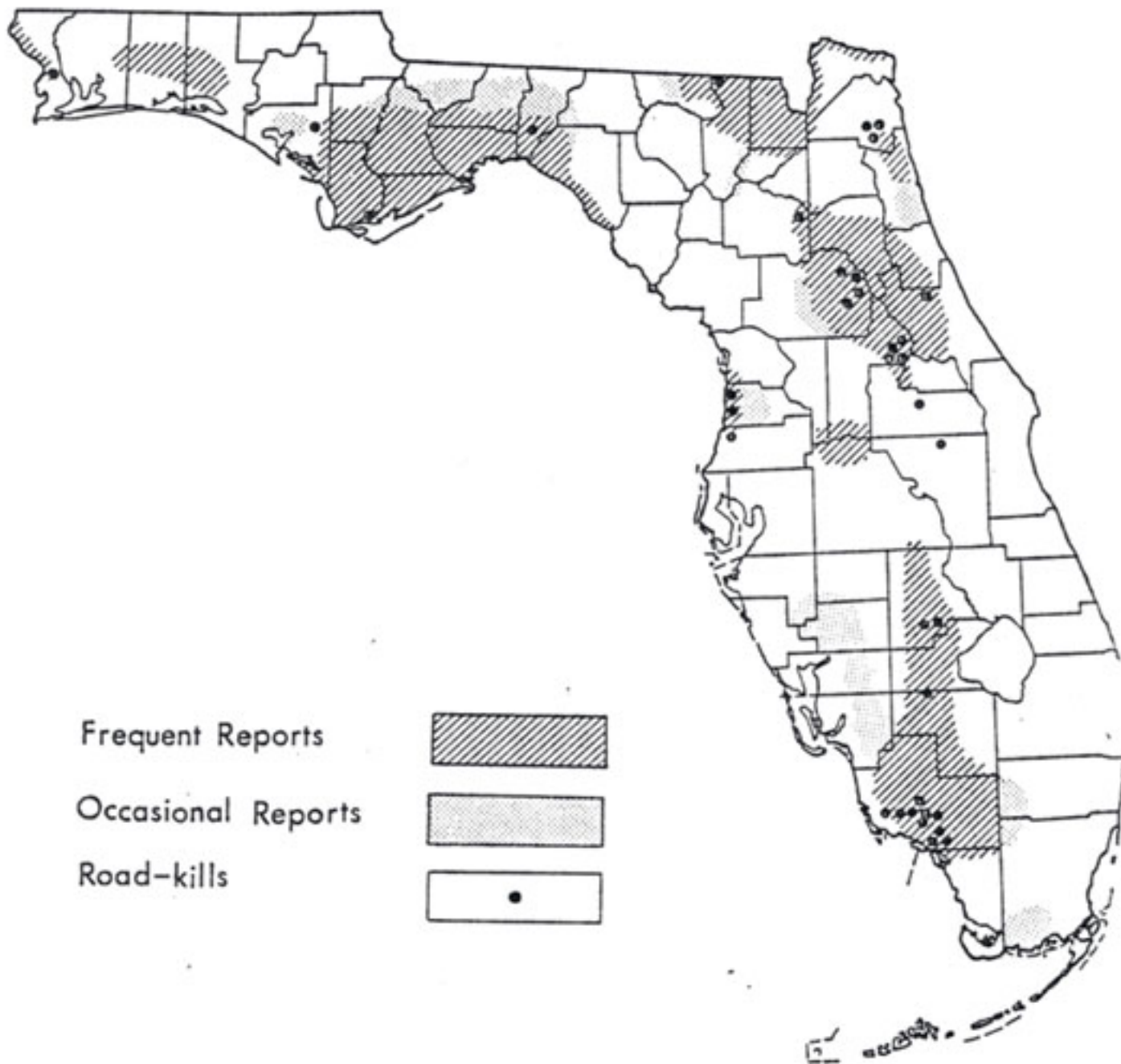


Figure 1. Distribution of the black bear in Florida.

TABLE 1. Florida Black Bear Hunt Data, 1974—1986.

Year	No. Of Days Open	Estimated Kill	%Males	Permits Sold
APALACHICOLA NATIONAL FOREST				
1974—75	23	9	—	—
1975—76	30	14	—	-
1976—77	16	7	-	-
1977—78	21	12	—	-
1978—79	21	12	—	—
1979-80	21	9	-	-
1980-81	21	10	—	171
1981-82	21	16	-	277
1982-83	21	12	-	233
1983-84	23	16	31	328
1984-85	23	26	58	465
1985-86	23	23	39	469
BAKER AND COLUMBIA COUNTIES				
Osceola Special Hunts				
1974—75	9	2	-	-
1975—76	9	5	—	-
1976-77	9	2	-	-
1977-78	9	5	-	-
1978-79	9	6	-	—
1979-80	9	2	-	-
1980-81	9	6	-	-
1981-82	9	8	-	-
1982-83	9	6	-	—
1983-84	9	8	-	-
1984-85	9	2	-	-
1985-86		9	3	-
General Hunting Season				
1977-78	59	17	-	—
1978—79	57	23	-	-
1979-80	57	-	-	-
1980-81	57	30	-	-
1981-82	57	26	-	-
1982-83	57	50	61	-
1983-84	57	19	57	-
1984-85	57	21	84	-
1985-86	57	46	66	-