

## **FLORIDA STATUS REPORT**

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Black bears occur in scattered locations throughout Florida. They are classified as a game animal in Apalachicola National Forest and Baker and Columbia counties, but in the rest of the state bears are listed as a threatened species. The major threat comes from habitat loss as Florida's remaining forests are cut and cleared to accommodate the daily influx of 1,000 new human residents. The relentless pressure to develop the wild lands that remain has led to the thought that in the future bears will only exist on large tracts of publicly-owned property. This is partially the case today, but private property, particularly that in close proximity to public land, continues to support black bears. The current battle to conserve black bears is focused on habitat preservation of these private lands, and in some cases attempts are being made to use the wildlife corridor concept which will provide belts of suitable habitat linking public property.

Personnel involved with black bear conservation have changed in the past 2 years. Jim Brady and Dave Maehr are still with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, but they are now administrators: Jim is in charge of the Wildlife Research Lab in Gainesville and Dave has moved to south Florida where he is working on the Florida panther project. They were replaced by John Wooding and Tom Hardisky. Work on black bears in northwest Florida is being carried out by Neill Hunter, who concentrates his efforts in Apalachicola National Forest (NF).

## **HARVEST INFORMATION**

Bear hunting is legal during the special bear season in Apalachicola and Osceola NF, during the general hunting season in Osceola NP, and on private land in Baker and Columbia counties. The special bear hunts have been held since 1949 and typically occur from late September through early November. Hunters are required to purchase a bear permit in addition to a regular hunting license. From 1973-86, season length in Apalachicola NF ranged from 20-30 days. Generally season length has been shorter in Osceola NF, and for the past several years the special season has been 9 days.

During the general hunting season, bear are legal game in portions of Osceola NF but the use of dogs is prohibited. Outside of Osceola NP on private land in Baker and Columbia counties, there are no restrictions on using dogs. Typically, season length runs approximately 60 days. Additional hunting is permitted during the archery and muzzle-loading seasons. Together these 2 seasons are approximately 30 days, making the total bear season length approximately 90 days.

Since 1983, statewide bear harvests have ranged from 35 in 1983 to a high of 68 in 1985 (Table 1). During the past 5 years, annual harvests on Apalachicola have averaged approximately 20 bears. In Baker and Columbia counties, including Osceola NF, annual harvests have averaged approximately 30 bears during the past 5 years.

Table 1. Florida black bear harvests, 1983-87.

Hunt Statewide Year	<u>Apalachicola NF</u>			<u>Baker &amp; Columbia cos.</u>			Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1983-84	5	11	16	11	8	19	35
1984-85	15	11	26	17	3	20	46
1985-86	9	14	23	32	13	45	68
1986-87	12	8	20	24	7	31	51
1987-88	12	6	18	16	11	27	45

## MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

In 1986, bear harvests from the 2 hunted areas were evaluated separately using the methods of Paloheimo and Fraser (1981). Based on this technique, as well as the high proportion of females in the harvests, it was concluded that changes were necessary on Apalachicola NF. The previous year attempts were made to shift the season to late November to reduce the female harvest but opposition from bear hunters prevented this change. In 1986, recommendations were made to shorten the season. In 1987, the season was reduced from 23 to 14 days, but harvests were not significantly reduced. Additional changes for Apalachicola NF have been proposed for 1988, but as yet these changes have not been accepted. Contrasting with Apalachicola NF, harvests in Baker and Columbia counties are believed to be within the range that the population can sustain.

In Florida's unhunted bear populations, management efforts have been directed towards identifying critical habitats. Conservation of these properties often requires that the land be purchased by the state. Some efforts have been successful, but the pressures to develop usually exceed those to preserve the habitat.

Other management efforts have been made to reduce the number of black bears killed by motor vehicles. Strategies include driver education concerning the problem, which involves a new chapter in the Florida Driver's Handbook discussing common sense ways to avoid a collision with an animal, and informational posters that will be distributed to driver's license offices. Warning signs have been erected along highways on which bears frequently cross and, in at least one new highway project, plans are being made to incorporate bear crossings under the highway.

The continuing problem of apiary depredations has been approached through a technique of capture and release at the trap site. This method is not a substitute for an electric fence but, for problem bears, which are not deterred by a hot fence, catch and release solves the problem without killing or relocating the bear. To date 47 different bears have been captured and released, and only 5 of these bears have been recaptured. Beekeepers who are knowledgeable about the method realize its effectiveness as a supplement to fencing

and they appreciate the results.

## **RESEARCH PROJECTS**

Carcasses of black bears killed by motor vehicles have been collected from Florida's roadsides since 1976. The information gained was compiled in 1987. Roadkills occurred most frequently in Collier county in south Florida. Males were killed approximately twice as frequently as were females, and males of dispersal age were killed more frequently than bears in other age classes. Peaks in the number of roadkills occurred in May-July and October-December.

Hibernation in Florida black bears is being investigated using radiotelemetry to monitor movements. The movement data has been supplemented with analysis of urea and creatine levels in blood collected from captured bears. Unfortunately, urea levels in the blood appear to be strongly influenced by diet, and the results of the blood analysis have revealed little. The movement data, on the other hand, suggests that hibernation may be restricted to subadult bears who are on their own and to females who are producing cubs. This interpretation is tentative and hopefully additional field work will help to clarify this.

During 1986 and 1987, research has focused on habitat requirements and movements of bears in the Ocala NF. Not surprisingly, radio monitoring revealed shifts in habitat use which coincided with available food supplies or dense vegetation for winter bedding. Field work on this project is expected to end in May, 1988.