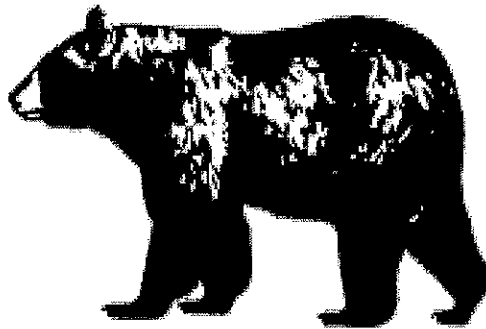


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**ATTITUDES TOWARD AND OPINIONS ABOUT A LOUISIANA
BLACK BEAR RECOVERY IN AND AROUND BIG THICKET
NATIONAL PRESERVE, TEXAS**



LAY REPORT
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Background

The historical range of the Louisiana subspecies of the American black bear included all of Louisiana, southern Mississippi, and eastern Texas. Overharvest and habitat destruction led to near demise of the subspecies. Black bear populations in southeast Texas were extinct by the early 1900's. At the end of the 1980's, only two small isolated populations remained, both in eastern Louisiana. During the 1990's, an extensive public information exchange led to recovery efforts for Louisiana black bear populations in Louisiana. The US Fish and Wildlife Service created a management plan for recovery of the Louisiana black bear throughout its historical range. Recovery in Louisiana has been successful thus far, and feasibility analyses have been completed in Mississippi.

In eastern Texas, the number of black bear sightings has increased during the past decade. Because there is no breeding bear population present in southeast Texas, it is likely that these sightings are transient bears from Arkansas, Oklahoma, or Louisiana. The increase in sightings prompted creation of a Texas black bear management plan by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Objectives of the plan for the next 10 years include public coordination, communication, and information dissemination, habitat management, and research. The ultimate goal is to restore habitat for the purpose of reestablishing black bear as a viable ecosystem component in eastern Texas.

Our study focused on the southern portion of East Texas including and surrounding Big Thicket National Preserve, which once contained a dense black bear population. Because the Preserve alone is not large enough to sustain a black bear population, success of a bear population recovery will heavily depend on tolerance of black bear presence by humans. Therefore, our objective was to assess the local residents' attitudes toward black bears and opinions about bear population recovery.

Results

We sent questionnaires (surveys) to 3,000 residents of southeastern Texas who live in proximity to Big Thicket National Preserve. We received 1,006 completed surveys. Three hundred and forty-six surveys were returned to us as undeliverable, and we received 64 refusals. Therefore, our overall response is currently approximately 40%. This summary of responses is divided based on major sections of the survey.

1) Respondent demographics:

Respondents averaged 54 years of age. Seventy-two percent of our respondents were male, which indicated that our sample is male-biased. This was expected because male names are more often listed in phone books (where we obtained our list of names and mailing addresses). Also, males are more likely to be interested in wildlife-related issues. Approximately 50% of our respondents indicated that they live in a rural area, 25% live within a small town, and 25% live in a large town, suburb, or small city. The average household size was 2.6 people, with an average of less than one individual younger than 18 years of age per household. The majority of respondents have pets.



More than 50% of respondents indicated that they have relatives who have lived in southeast Texas for at least two generations. In fact, several respondents indicated that they are descendents of local bear hunters. Respondents have resided in 48 out of 50 states, as well as in 42 countries around the world.

2) Participation in wildlife-related activities:

Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated that they are interested in wildlife, and 42% take part in wildlife-related activities (e.g., camping, hunting). Fifty percent of respondents hunt, and 45% of hunters were interested in hunting for black bears locally. Respondents mainly receive information related to wildlife from TV or magazines, but personal experiences, family/friends/co-workers, and hunting/fishing regulation guides were also important information sources.

3) Interactions with and knowledge about black bears:

Approximately 25% of respondents indicated that they have seen a black bear in the wild. These sightings have occurred throughout the United States and Canada (the most commonly noted location was Colorado). Seeing a bear was a very positive experience for most respondents. Most respondents have seen black bears in a zoo, watched a TV show or movie about bears, or read something about bears.

Approximately half of respondents were aware that southeast Texas was once home to a large population of black bears, black bears in Texas are a protected species, and that black bears are mainly vegetarians and exist throughout most of North America. Fewer respondents were aware that black bear populations in neighboring states (i.e., Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma) are increasing, and that this has resulted in an increasing number of black bear sightings in eastern Texas.

4) Attitudes toward black bears and presence of black bears in southeast Texas:

More than 60% of respondents indicated that they would enjoy having black bears in southeast Texas, but many were concerned about problems that might occur. In fact, the majority of respondents' overall attitudes toward black bears were positive. In addition, the more than 60% of respondents indicated that the presence of black bears is a sign of a healthy environment, and that bears have a right to exist. Strong negative attitudes toward and opinions about bears existed as well. Some respondents indicated that they were afraid of black bears and that they consider black bears to be dangerous animals.

Fewer than 25% of respondents indicated that black bears are a potential danger to humans. The most commonly cited reasons were bears are wild animals, humans are the danger/problem, and they (respondents) have seen or heard of bear attacks on TV or from others. Approximately 40% of respondents indicated that bears are not a potential danger because bears are scared of/avoid/ignore/are not interested in humans and danger from or attacks by bears are rare. Approximately 26% of respondents felt that they did not know enough about bears to say whether bears were a potential danger to humans. Regardless of answer, many indicated that bears might be dangerous when cubs are present, or if a bear is startled or feels threatened.



Few respondents felt that black bears are a nuisance. Concerns were mainly related to bears pilfering through garbage or for food in areas occupied by humans, or as a result of humans feeding them. Approximately 48% of respondents indicated that bears are not a nuisance because bears avoid/are scared of/ignore humans. Respondents who were unsure felt that they did not know enough about bears to choose an answer.

5) Black bear management:

Only 5% of respondents agreed with the statement that black bears should not exist in eastern Texas. Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated that the local black bear population should be increased if the management strategy involved steps to lessen the chance of human-bear conflict. Fewer than 20% of respondents indicated that the black bear population should not be increased.

If enough support for increasing the black bear population ultimately exists among eastern Texas residents, there are two possible management strategies that may take place: 1) allow the black bear population to increase naturally (i.e., without assistance from natural resource agencies), or 2) natural resource agencies may restock (i.e., reintroduce) black bears into areas of suitable habitat. We asked for opinions on both strategies as potential options. Approximately 40% of respondents indicated that the black bear population should increase naturally, mainly for the reason that nature should be allowed to take its course. Approximately 30% of residents indicated that the black bear population should not increase naturally, mainly for the reasons that it would take too long, the population was too small to increase successfully on its own, and out of concern about poaching/outlaw hunters. Fifty percent of respondents indicated support for restocking of black bears in eastern Texas. In cases of human-bear conflicts, 88% of respondents indicated preference for non-lethal methods for handling problem bears, whereas approximately 12% preferred killing of a bear after a first offense. In fact, very few respondents indicated that bears should be killed even after several conflicts with humans. Several respondents indicated that decisions about how to handle bear problems should be handled on a case-by-case basis.

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