

**Findings of the Alaska Board of Game
2023-227-BOG
BOARD OF GAME BEAR CONSERVATION, HARVEST,
AND MANAGEMENT POLICY
(Expiration Date: July, 2028
This policy supersedes BOG Policy #2016-214-BOG)**

Purposes of Policy

1. To clarify the intent of the Board and provide guidelines for Board members and the Department of Fish and Game (Department) to consider when developing regulation proposals for the conservation and harvest of bears in Alaska, consistent with the Alaska Constitution and applicable statutes.
2. To encourage review, comment, and interagency coordination for bear management activities.

Goals

1. To ensure the conservation of bears throughout their historic range in Alaska.
2. To recognize the ecological and economic importance of bears while providing for their management as a harvestable opportunity, food, predatory, and furbearer species.
3. To recognize the importance of bears for customary and traditional uses, viewing, photography, research, and non-consumptive uses in Alaska.

Background

The wild character of Alaska's landscapes is one of our most important natural resources and the presence of naturally abundant populations of brown/grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) and black bears (*Ursus americanus*) throughout their historic range in Alaska is important to that wild character. Bears are important to Alaskans in many ways, including as food animals, predators of moose, caribou, deer and muskox, a unique species opportunity for nonresident and resident hunters, furbearers, , and as objects of curiosity, study, awe, and enjoyment. Bears are also important components of naturally functioning Alaskan ecosystems.

Bear viewing is a rapidly growing industry in selected areas of the state. The interest exceeds the opportunities provided now by such established and controlled sites as McNeil River, Pack Creek, Anan Creek, Wolverine Creek and Brooks Camp. In most areas, hunting and viewing are compatible uses but the Board may consider bear viewing as a priority use in some small areas, especially where access for people is good and bears are particularly concentrated. The Board, the Department , and the Alaska Wildlife Troopers will continue to discourage people from feeding bears to provide viewing and will continue to enforce laws against persons who feed bears illegally.

Bears are frequently attracted to garbage or to fish and hunting camps and can be a nuisance where they become habituated to humans and human food sources. Dealing with problem bears has been especially difficult in Anchorage, Juneau, and the Kenai Peninsula. The Department has worked hard, and successfully, with municipalities to educate people and solve waste

management problems. The Department 's policy on human food and solid waste management (<http://www.wc.adfg.state.ak.us/index.cfm?adfg=bears.bearpolicy>) provides guidance on reducing threats to humans and the resulting need to kill problem bears.

Bears can pose a threat to humans in certain situations. The Department has the regulatory authority to address human/bear conflicts and has developed a detailed approach to investigating incidents involving bears and humans. In addition, the Department has developed a detailed wildlife safety curriculum for use internally and by the public, with considerable focus on bears. The Department and the Board will continue to educate people about ways to minimize threats to humans and the resulting need to remove problem bears.

Alaska is world-renowned as a place to hunt brown bears, grizzly bears and black bears. Alaska is the only place in the United States where brown and grizzly bears are hunted in large numbers. The brown bear harvest has remained stable over the last 10 years, despite more liberal regulations governing take. Many of the hunters are nonresidents and their economic impact is significant to Alaska. Hunters have traditionally been the strongest advocates for bears and their habitat, providing consistent financial and political support for research and management programs.

Because bears can be both prey and predator, their relationship with people is complex. Throughout much of Interior Alaska and in some areas of Southcentral Alaska, the combined predation by bears and wolves keeps moose at relatively low levels. Bear predation on young calves has been shown to contribute significantly to keeping moose populations depressed, delayed population recovery, and low harvest by humans. People in parts of rural Alaska (e.g., Yukon Flats) have expressed considerable frustration with low moose numbers and high predation rates on moose calves in hunting areas around villages. The Board and the Department take an active role in addressing bear management issues. Because the Constitution of the State of Alaska requires all wildlife (including predators) to be managed on a sustained yield basis, the Board of Game and the Department will manage all bear populations to maintain a sustained yield, and the Board recognizes its broad latitude to manage predators including bears to provide for higher yields of ungulates (*West vs State of Alaska*, Alaska Supreme Court, 6 August 2010).

Brown and grizzly bears

Although there is no clear taxonomic difference between brown and grizzly bears, there are ecological and economic differences that are recognized by the Board and Department . In the area south of a line following the crest of the Alaska Range from the Canadian border westward to the 62nd parallel of latitude to the Bering Sea, where salmon are important in the diet of *Ursus arctos*, these bears are commonly referred to as brown bears. Brown bears grow relatively large, tend to be less predatory on ungulates, usually occur at high densities, and are highly sought after by hunters for the unique hunting opportunity generally only found in Alaska and for viewing and photography. Bears found north of this line in Interior and Arctic Alaska; where densities are lower and which are usually smaller in size, more predatory on ungulates, and have fewer opportunities to feed on salmon; are referred to as grizzly bears. Brown and grizzly bears are found throughout their historic range in Alaska and may have expanded their recent historic range in the last few decades into places like the Yukon Flats and lower Koyukuk River.

Although determining precise population size is not possible with techniques currently available, most bear populations are estimated to be stable or increasing based on aerial counts, Capture-

Mark-Resight techniques (including DNA), harvest data, traditional knowledge, and evidence of expansion of historic ranges. Throughout most coastal habitats where salmon are abundant, brown bears are abundant and typically exceed 175 bears/1,000 km² (450 bears/1,000 mi²). A population in Katmai National Park on the Alaska Peninsula was measured at 550 bears/1,000 km² (1,420 bears/1,000 mi²). In most interior and northern coastal areas, densities do not exceed 40 bears/1,000 km² (100 bears/1,000 mi²). Mean densities as low as 4 grizzly bears/1,000 km² (12 bears/1,000 mi²) have been measured in the eastern Brooks Range but these density estimates may be biased low and the confidence intervals around the estimates are unknown. Extrapolations from existing density estimates yielded statewide estimate of 31,700 brown bears in 1993, but the estimate is likely to be low.

Although some northern grizzly bear populations have relatively low reproductive rates, most grizzly bear and brown bear populations are capable of sustaining relatively high harvest rates comparable to moose, caribou, sheep, goats, and other big game animals that exist in the presence of natural numbers of large predators in most areas of Alaska. In addition, grizzly bears and brown bears have shown their ability to recover relatively quickly (<15 years) from federal poisoning campaigns during the 1950s and overharvest on the Alaska Peninsula during the 1960s. Biologists were previously concerned about the conservation of brown bears on the Kenai Peninsula and brown bears there were listed by the state as a “species of special concern”. The Department implemented a conservation strategy there through a stakeholder process. In recent years it has become apparent that brown bears remain healthy on the Kenai and the Board, and the Department no longer believes there is a conservation concern.

In some areas of the state (e.g., Unit 13) where the Board has tried to reduce grizzly bear numbers with liberal seasons and bag limits for over 15 years, there is no evidence that current increased harvests have affected bear numbers, age structure, or population composition. In areas of Interior Alaska, where access is relatively poor, long conventional hunting seasons and bag limits of up to 2 bears per year have not been effective at reducing numbers of grizzly bears. In these areas, most biologists believe that as long as sows and cubs are protected from harvest it will not be possible to reduce populations enough to achieve increases in recruitment of moose.

Black bears

American black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are generally found in forested habitats throughout the state. Like brown and grizzly bears, black bears also occupy all of their historic ranges in Alaska and are frequently sympatric with grizzly and brown bears. Because they live in forested habitats it is difficult to estimate population size or density. Where estimates have been conducted in interior Alaska, densities ranged from 67 bears/1,000 km² (175 bears/1,000 mi²) on the Yukon Flats to 289 bears/1,000 km² (750 bears/1,000 mi²) on the Kenai Peninsula. In coastal forest habitats of Southeast Alaska’s Alexander Archipelago, black bear densities are considered high. A 2000 estimate for Kuiu Island was 1,560 black bears/1,000 km² (4,000 black bears/1,000 mi²).

In most areas of the state, black bears are viewed primarily as food animals, but they are also sought after for their fur/hides, and as predators of moose calves. The Board classified black bears as furbearers, recognizing the desire of people to use black bear fur as trim on clothing, to enhance the value of black bears, and to enable the Board and the Department to use foot-snares in bear management programs. The classification of black bears as a furbearer has legalized the sale of some black bear hides and parts (except gall bladders) and has thus made regulations in Alaska similar to those in northern Canada in this regard.

Black bears exhibit higher reproductive rates than brown and grizzly bears. In all areas of the state black bear populations are healthy and can sustain current or increased harvest levels. However, hunting pressure on black bears in some coastal areas like Game Management Unit (GMU) 6 (Prince William Sound), GMU 2 (Prince of Wales Island) and parts of GMU 3 (Kuiu Island) may be approaching or have exceeded maximum desired levels if mature bears are to be preserved and are the subjects of frequent regulatory adjustments.

In some other parts of the state, deliberately reducing black bear numbers to improve moose calf survival has proven to be difficult or impossible with conventional harvest programs. The Board has had to resort to more innovative regulations promoting baiting and trapping with foot snares. The Department has also tried an experimental solution of translocating bears away from an important moose population near McGrath (GMU 19D) to determine if reduced bear numbers could result in significant increases in moose numbers and harvests. The success of the McGrath program has made it a potential model for other small areas around villages in Interior Alaska, if acceptable relocation sites are available.

Guiding Principles

The Board of Game and the Department will promote regulations and policies that will strive to:

1. Manage bear populations to provide for continuing sustained yield, while allowing a wide range of human uses in all areas of the state.
2. Ensure subsistence uses of bears are provided in accordance with state law.
3. Ensure public safety near population centers.
4. Continue and, if appropriate, increase research on the management of bears and on predator/prey relationships and methods to mitigate the high predation rates of bears on moose calves in areas designated for intensive management.
5. Continue to provide for and encourage non-consumptive use of bears without causing bears to become habituated to human food.
6. Favor conventional hunting seasons and bag limits to manage bear numbers.
7. Encourage the human use of bear meat as food.
8. Employ more efficient harvest strategies, if necessary, when bear populations need to be substantially reduced to mitigate conflicts between bears and people.
9. Work with the Department to develop innovative ways of increasing bear harvests if conventional hunting seasons and bag limits are not effective at reducing bear numbers to mitigate predation on ungulates or to deal with problem bears.
10. Simplify hunting regulations for bears and increase opportunity for incidental harvest of grizzly bears in Interior Alaska by eliminating resident tag fees.
11. Recognize the increasing value of mature brown bears, especially in Units 1-6 and 8-10, and generate increased revenue from sales of brown bear tags.
12. Review and recommend revision to this policy as needed.

Conservation and Management Policy

The Board and the Department will manage bears differently in different areas of the state, in accordance with ecological differences and the needs and desires of humans. Bears will always be managed on a sustained yield basis. In all non-subsistence areas, the priority is to ensure continued subsistence uses of bears in accordance with state law. In some areas, such as the Kodiak Archipelago, portions of Southeast Alaska and the Alaska Peninsula, brown bears will generally be managed for mature adult bears for hunting, and for viewing opportunities. In Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound, black bears will generally be managed as for sustainable populations for harvest, food animals, and viewing opportunities. In Interior and Arctic Alaska, black bears and grizzly bears will be managed primarily for sustainable populations, food animals, and predators of moose and caribou. Near population centers bears will be managed to ensure for public safety. In some parts of Interior Alaska, the Board may elect to manage populations of black bears primarily as furbearers.

Monitoring Harvest and Population Size

The Board and the Department recognize the importance of monitoring the size and health of bear populations on all lands in Alaska to determine if bear population management and conservation goals are being met. In areas where monitoring bear numbers, population composition, and age class is a high priority, sealing of all bear hides and skulls will be required. At the present time, all brown and grizzly bears harvested under the general, drawing, or registration hunting regulations must be inspected and sealed by a Department representative. Where monitoring bear numbers and harvests is a lower priority, harvest may be monitored using harvest tickets or subsistence harvest surveys.

Harvest of black bears will generally be monitored either with harvest tickets or sealing requirements. Where harvests are near maximum sustainable levels or where the Department and the Board need detailed harvest data, sealing will be required.

Large areas of the state have subsistence brown/grizzly bear hunts with liberal seasons and bag limits, mandatory meat salvage, and relaxed sealing requirements. The Department will continue to provide for subsistence needs.

Bear viewing also is an important aspect of bear management in Alaska. Increasing interest in watching bears at concentrated feeding areas such as salmon streams and sedge flats, and clam flats is challenging managers to find appropriate levels and types of human and bear interactions without jeopardizing human safety. Bear hunting and viewing are compatible in most situations.

Nothing in this policy affects the authority under state or federal laws for an individual to protect human life or property from bears (5 AAC 92.410). All reasonable steps must be taken to protect life and property by non-lethal means before a bear is killed.

Managing Predation by Bears

In order to comply with the AS 16.05.255, the Board and Department may implement management actions to reduce bear predation on ungulate populations. The Board may promulgate regulations that allow the Department to temporarily reduce bear populations in Game Management Units, Subunits, or management areas. The Board and the Department may


also need to reduce bear predation on ungulates to provide for continued sustained yield management or conservation of ungulates. In addition, it may be necessary for the Department to kill problem bears to protect the safety of the public under AS 16.05.050 (a) (5). In some cases, the Board may direct the Department to prepare a Predation Control Areas Implementation Plan (5 AAC 92.125 or 92.126) or in other cases the Board may authorize extensions of conventional hunting seasons or implement trapping seasons to aid in managing predation on ungulates.

To comply with AS 16.05.255 to maintain sustained yield management of wildlife populations, or to prevent populations of ungulates from declining to low levels, the Board may selectively consider changes to regulations allowing the public to take bears, including allowing the following:

- Baiting of bears
- Trapping, using foot-snares, for bears under bear management or predator control programs.
- Incidental takes of brown or grizzly bears during black bear management or predator control programs.
- Use of communications equipment between hunters or trappers.
- Sale of hides and skulls as incentives for taking bears.
- Diversionary feeding of bears during ungulate calving seasons.
- Use of black bears for handicraft items for sale, except gall bladders.
- Use of grizzly bears for handicraft items for sale, except gall bladders.
- Taking of sows accompanied by cubs and cubs.
- Same-day-airborne taking.
- Aerial shooting of bears by Department staff
- Suspension or repeal of bear tag fees.
- Use of helicopters.

The Board intends that with the exception of baiting, the above-listed methods and means will be authorized primarily in situations that require active control of bear populations, and only for the minimum amount of time necessary to accomplish management objectives. The Board allows baiting of black bears as a normal method of take in broad areas of the state and will consider allowing brown bear baiting as a normal method of take in select areas.

Vote: 7-0
January 19, 2023
Ketchikan, Alaska



Jerry Burnett, Chairman
Board of Game