

ONE BEAR OF A PROBLEM

CONSERVATION POLICY COLUMN



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Because bears are so charismatic, and many non-hunters don't fully understand how bear meat, grease, and furs are utilized, our fellow citizens (and not a few fellow hunters) tend to approve of hunting bears less than the hunting of other species. Today, decisions about where, how, or if we may hunt bears are at the heart of a broader controversy over how we manage wildlife in this country and who should be responsible.

Ballot initiatives seeking to ban bear hunting have become common over the last three decades, as have lawsuits seeking to ban certain forms of hunting. While legal, neither of these mechanisms for making policy are particularly helpful nor are they conducive to incorporating the best available science,

public perception, and hunting ethics into decision-making. Further, state legislatures have made new laws to expand or contract hunting opportunities for bears, like expanding hound hunting for black bears in areas where grizzly bears occur. While these new policies may be popular among some hunters and are legitimate, they are also unhelpful because they disrupt the institutions crafted over time to best construct wildlife policy.

Federal management decisions made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could be viewed like the rules made by ballot initiatives, litigation, or state legislation. The policies governing other bears, especially those listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), raise different challenges than those species firmly under state management. Grizzly bears may not be hunted in the lower 48 states because, as of this writing, they are protected under the ESA. The same species may be pursued north of the 49th parallel. The Boone and Crockett Club recently

released a revised position statement on grizzly bears (and wolves) that outlines the history of this species' status under the ESA. The Club's position is that recovered populations of grizzly bears should be delisted, and state management be resumed.

Decisions surrounding bears and the hunting of recovered bear populations should—and typically do—occur within state wildlife commissions. However, these commissions have become the most recent target of some wildlife activists who seek to minimize the role of hunting, fishing, and trapping in wildlife management. This debate is perhaps most heated in Washington State, where spring bear hunting has been “paused” by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission since 2022. However, Colorado might not be far behind with the recent appointment of a handful of commissioners representing “outdoor recreation and parks utilization” constituencies. While ensuring qualified people are appointed to these bodies is important,

giving these commissions clear direction on how they should make policy is more critical. Several of these bodies are tasked with ensuring we leave wildlife populations better than we found them. Others must ensure opportunities for sustainable harvest—of bears and other species—remain available to the public.

Unless otherwise stated, like in the case of an ESA listing, state governments prescribe how wildlife are managed. Typically, this power is delegated to a state wildlife commission or board tasked with deciding what ends up in your regulation booklet. While this varies from state to state, it often includes season structure, if or how many licenses hunters

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can purchase, and the means and methods hunters can employ while in the field.

The rules for hunting black bears differ depending on location for various reasons and non-reasons. Bear hunting with hounds is a longstanding tradition in the Great Lakes states. In other regions, baiting is common. In much of the West, black bear boars may (currently) be harvested in the spring, but using dogs at any time of the year is frequently outlawed. Other states, like Missouri, have recently begun hunting black bears again after generations without legal harvest opportunities. Regional traditions and unique ecological contexts mean hunting regulations differ by state and by tribe.

Species sharing the genus *Ursus* occur from Florida to Alaska and nearly everywhere in between, making bears some of the most widespread omnivores on the continent. Four species of ursids, including grizzly bears, Alaska brown bears, polar bears, and black bears, are eligible for entry in our Club's record program, but bear hunting, like hunting other large carnivores, is not secure.

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Further, we must commit ourselves to holding wildlife managers, state legislators, litigators, federal officials, and wildlife commissioners to high professional, scientific, and ethical standards. While some areas of the law merely seek adequacy from our regulatory mechanisms, hunters, conservationists, and sportsmen should seek excellence. In building durable wildlife policy, we must combine biology, tradition, and public perception with the law, just as our Club has done for the last 137 years. Today that means wading into the law that governs many different wildlife conservation and management institutions and preparing to move each of them further in the right direction. ■



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