Renewed calls for legal hunt to control Connecticut's rising bear population

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Connecticut's population of about 700 black bears is growing at a rate of about 10 percent each year, according to wildlife experts, an increase that could more than double the current number of bears in this state over the next decade.

Those predictions and the rising number of bear-human confrontations are leading to renewed calls for legalizing bear hunting in the state. The 2017 Legislature killed a bear hunt bill after fierce opposition from animal rights groups and many nature lovers.

Hunting advocates point to the rising number of bear sightings around the state - 6,276 in the past year - and numerous bear attacks on livestock and pets as evidence of the need to control the bear population. But they are also doubtful that lawmakers will take action in time to prevent more serious incidents.

"Somebody's probably going to have to get hurt before we get a bear hunt," said Bob Crook, executive director of the Coalition of Connecticut Sportsmen. "That's the feeling of a lot of people I talk to," he added. "I hope that doesn't happen."

Connecticut is the only state in the Northeast with a significant bear population that doesn't allow bear hunting.

Anti-bear hunt activists argue that a more effective and humane way to deal with the rising number of bears in Connecticut is to educate people
about protecting garbage and other food sources from these clever and always hungry omnivores, and explain to people what to do when they encounter a bear.

Bear hunting hasn't reduced the number of human-bear confrontations in New Jersey, said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. Since hunting of black bears in that state was resumed in 2010 with the support of Gov. Chris Christie, "aggressive bear incidences haven't gone down, they've stayed about the same," Tittel said.

But Jason Hawley, a veteran wildlife biologist with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, said data he's seen from New Jersey indicates that bear-human confrontations in that state "certainly did decrease" after bear hunting was authorized.

Hawley said in states that allow bear hunting, one beneficial side effect "is installing a natural fear of humans, which is a good thing." He said that in Maine, the state with the largest population of black bears in the U.S. outside Alaska, "you rarely even see a bear ... And if you do see a bear, it's running full speed away from you."

"Connecticut bears have no fear of humans," Hawley said.

In September 2014, 22-year-old Rutgers University student Darsh Patel was killed by a black bear while hiking in a preserve in northwestern New Jersey. He was the first person in modern history to be killed by a bear in that state.

Tittel said New Jersey wildlife officials haven't done enough to educate people about how to deal with bears and how to protect potential food sources. Tittel predicts that bear hunting in New Jersey will be banned once Christie leaves office next year.
"We're not necessarily opposed to hunting," Tittel said, but added that the current system used in New Jersey "is more of a trophy hunt than a management hunt ... They go after the big bears."

Earlier this year, Florida wildlife officials decided to halt that state's bear hunts for two years while they study bear management systems and how to reduce bear-human confrontations.

A study by University of Connecticut researchers concluded that the highest concentrations of bears in Connecticut are found not in the most remote areas but in "exurban areas" where there is both woodland and scattered houses where they can forage for garbage seeds from bird feeders.

Anti-hunting activists insist that numerous scientific studies have found no evidence that bear hunting reduces the number of human-bear confrontations and that Connecticut's wildlife division needs to do a better job of nonlethal bear management.

Annie Hornish, state director of the Connecticut branch of the Humane Society, told lawmakers that the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, or DEEP, "appears to be favoring lethal means to address conflicts over implementation of tried and tested nonlethal measures."

Nonlethal measures include education of people on bear-proofing potential food sources like garbage and using "averse conditioning" to teach problem bears to avoid humans and their properties. Averse conditioning can include shooting problem bears with nonlethal pellets, using fire crackers and loud noises to scare bears away from houses or livestock areas.

DEEP officials deny they are killing problem bears without trying other
approaches first. "Euthanizing a bear is always the response of last resort and something we do not do lightly," said Dennis Schain, DEEP's spokesman.

Since 2013, state wildlife officials or homeowners have shot and killed 18 bears in Connecticut for aggressive behavior or destruction of property. In 2015, seven bears were killed by DEEP staff members or homeowners. Last year, four bears were killed by DEEP for behavior problems, and two bears have been shot this year for aggressive behavior.

The only reported bear attack on a human in this state happened in June of this year when a woman walking her dog in a Simsbury park encountered a bear that "took a swipe at her" and left the woman with minor scratches on her legs. The bear was found and killed by state wildlife officials.

Two bears were shot in September 2015 after one of them stalked a woman hiking in Burlington's Sessions Woods and actually touched her leg with his nose.

Many more bears have been killed in motor vehicle accidents, with at least 43 dying after being hit by cars or trucks in 2016 - the highest total in recent years. So far in 2017, at least 28 bears have died as a result of motor vehicle collisions, with experts saying it is likely that the total is likely higher because bears that are hit often crawl into the woods and die later. "The only significant source of mortality for black bears in Connecticut is vehicle kills," Hawley said.

Hornish also claims her organization offered in 2015 to pay for signs at all state parks and forests explaining to people what to do if they encounter a bear, but was turned down by the state. Schain said the "issue wasn't the cost of the signs but what is the best strategy for use of
them." He said the state now has warning signs in place "where people might come in contact with bears."

"It is the opinion of our wildlife biologists that bear hunting - with prudent limitations - is consistent with best practices for wildlife management for Connecticut," Robert Klee, commissioner of the state's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, told lawmakers in March 2017.

Klee predicted that, without hunting as a control, Connecticut's bear population could eventually reach 3,000 animals. He said there was about a 50 percent increase in bear sightings between 2015 and 2016, and state residents reported 960 cases of bears damaging their property.

In June of this year, a 557-pound male black bear was shot and killed in Kent as he was heading for a barn where a bear had killed a miniature donkey two weeks earlier. State officials concluded the shooting was justified to protect other animals in the barn.

The co-chair of the Legislature's Environment Committee, state Sen. Ted Kennedy Jr., D-Conn., isn't in favor of legalizing bear hunting in Connecticut but acknowledges that "this issue isn't going away."

Despite the increasing range of Connecticut's bear population, Kennedy said that bear confrontations "are not a widespread problem in this state."

"I do agree that this is a public safety issue," Kennedy said, but he added that, "We need to try alternative approaches before considering a bear hunting season."

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