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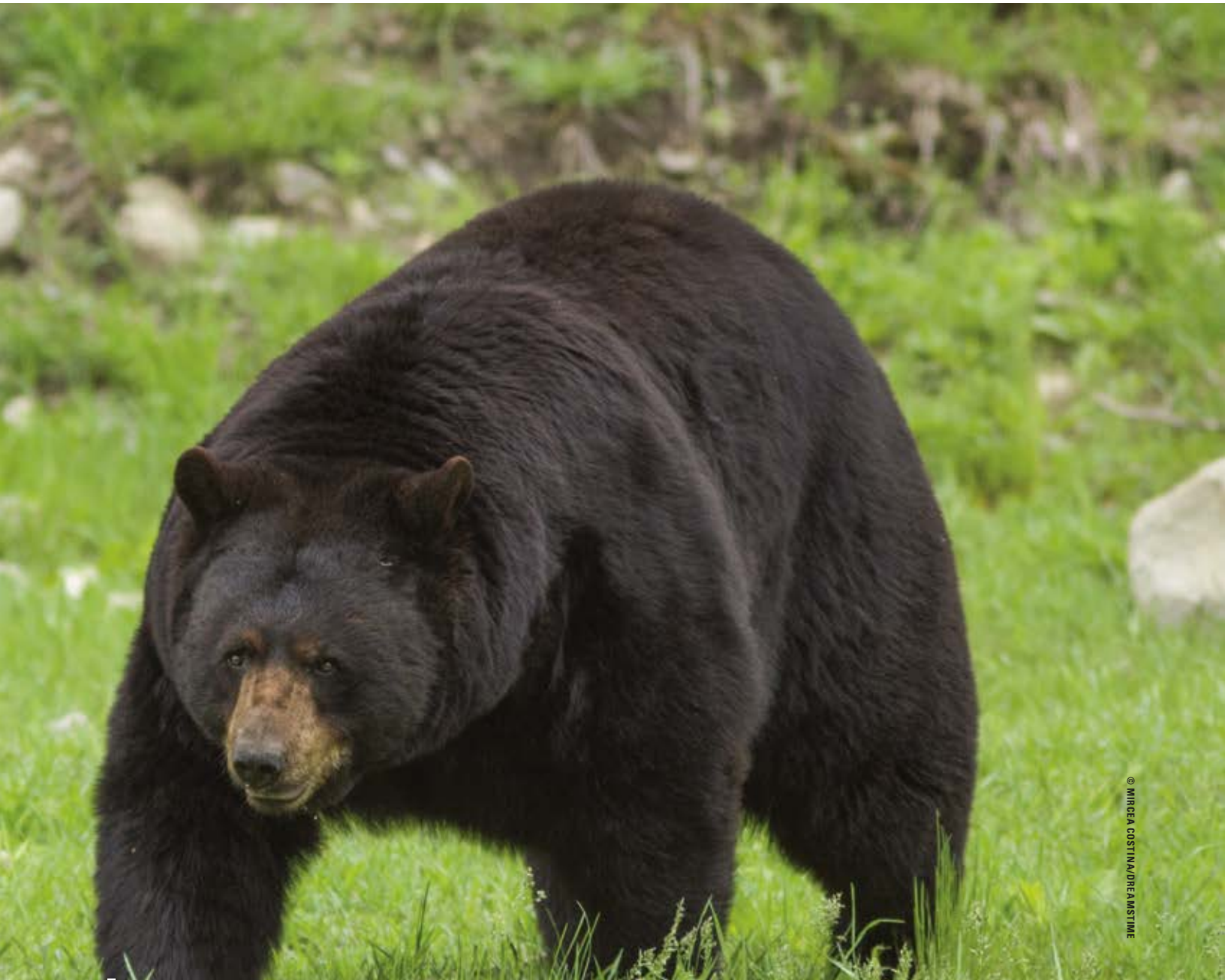
SPRING BLACK BEAR HUNTS

**PERSPECTIVE FROM THE
ONTARIO FEDERATION
OF ANGLERS AND HUNTERS**



At a time when more and more North American game and fish departments are considering spring and/or fall hunting seasons to manage increasing black bear populations, it is helpful to examine the experiences of other jurisdictions. Ontario has a long and varied history of black bear hunting and management and can provide some useful insight into the state of bear management today.

Ontario is blessed with healthy big game populations that support sustainable hunts in every corner of the province's one million square kilometers. Until 1960, black bears were considered vermin and were persecuted under a bounty system. It wasn't until 1961 that the province, with encouragement from the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), recognized the black bear as a valuable big game animal that deserved increased protection and management. In that year



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The cancellation of the spring bear hunt in Ontario is symptomatic of a larger problem facing hunters and anglers across North America. Hunting and fishing seasons for certain species all across the continent are under pressure from a variety of sources, including urban-based anti-hunting, animal rights activists and their political supporters. Governments of all stripes would rather take the easy way out, closing seasons or cutting tags or licences

that only affect hunters and anglers, rather than looking for the root causes of wildlife or fish population declines and managing these on the basis of science, not social or political pressures. The cancellation of the spring bear hunt in Ontario is only one example of how uninformed governments act in the face of pressure that has little to do with the causal factors behind a species decline, and more to do with what's politically expedient. In doing so, they ignore the

fact that hunters and anglers are the ones who called for the creation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation in response to threats to our wildlife and fish populations; they ignore the fact that hunters and anglers put their money where their mouth is and fund on-the-ground conservation programs to protect and restore species throughout the continent; and they ignore the fact that hunting and angling contribute billions of dollars

to the national economies of our respective countries and pay for a majority of the fish and wildlife programs that everyone benefits from. The next time a government decides to take the easy way out, or to bend to the will of anti-hunting activists, who contribute little but hot air, they would do well to ask themselves, who's paying the freight?

GREG FARRANT
MANAGER OF GOVERNMENT
AFFAIRS AND POLICY - OFAH

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the black bear was listed as a game mammal and the bounty was revoked, increasing the black bear's value to both hunters and the province's overall biodiversity. In 1980 the province created a separate black bear license, requiring deer and moose hunters to purchase a separate licence to hunt bears.

For over 60 years Ontario enjoyed the benefits of both spring and fall hunting seasons. For much of that time, the spring bear hunt catered mostly to non-resident hunters. Resident participation was insignificant in the early season (most hunted strictly in the fall), but began increasing after black bears were listed as a game animal. By the early 1990s, resident hunters accounted for approximately 50 percent of bear licence sales, but only 25-30 percent of the spring harvest. The difference in harvest is owing to the higher success rates of outfitter-led, non-resident hunters. All told, 6,000 bears were harvested by over 20,000 hunters each year.

But this proven wildlife management tool came to a screeching halt in 1999 when then Premier Mike Harris caved to pressure from a wealthy industrialist and animal rights activists and abolished the spring bear hunt in Ontario. These groups pressured Harris with an emotionally charged and scientifically inaccurate tagline that "Even one orphaned bear cub is too many." With the stroke of a pen, anti-use activists were successful in eliminating

hundreds of jobs and \$40 million in annual economic contributions. Public consultation revealed that the majority (64 percent) of comments supported maintaining the spring bear hunt. Wildlife management decisions were being made based entirely on emotion, as opposed to sound and defensible science.

The OFAH, along with representatives from the tourist industry and academia took the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to court in an attempt to have the decision overturned. As the largest non-profit, conservation-based organization in Ontario and Canada, the OFAH remains the only stakeholder group with the capacity to fight this type of injustice. We argued that the purpose of Ontario's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act is restricted to conservation and safety issues where game populations are managed, and that the government's objective of individual animal welfare was contrary to the basic principles of conservation and natural resource management. We feared that if the law permitted the government to cancel the spring bear hunt to prevent the accidental and *already illegal* orphaning of a single bear cub, then it could easily be extended to moose, deer, duck, or wolf seasons. Government data estimates that on average, a maximum of 27 bear cubs were accidentally orphaned by hunters per year, which is significantly less than the number orphaned by vehicle collisions and about ten times fewer than what the anti-use activists falsely claimed. But this case was about much more than the spring bear hunt—it was about our rights as Canadians to ensure that government policy is not based on misinformation. The case worked its way through the provincial court system, but was ultimately defeated when

the Supreme Court of Canada refused to hear our final appeal. By that point, our colitigators had abandoned the case, leaving the OFAH to shoulder the burden of protecting our hunting heritage. It was a direct attack on hunting, and remains one of the greatest anti-hunting victories in the history of North America. Despite losing the case, the OFAH is proud to have challenged the government, reminding them that wildlife management decisions must be evidence-based and not determined by those with the deepest pockets.

Over the past 15 years the OFAH has never given up the fight for full reinstatement of the spring bear hunt, because of the suite of benefits it provides. The spring bear hunt provides significant personal, social, economic, and biological benefits. Spring bear hunters are rewarded with the riches of the hunting experience—spiritual fulfillment, self-improvement, connection to nature, as well as wholesome food and valuable hides. Government information shows that for the 12-year period 1987-1998, the spring bear hunt generated \$350-\$500 million in direct and indirect economic benefits, and 2,600-3,600 person-years of employment. A spring bear hunt successfully reduces bear densities (particularly

male bears) immediately prior to the peak human-bear conflict period, reduces cannibalism by male bears on females and cubs, and reduces predation on deer fawns and moose calves. Ontario's spring bear hunt was a proven example of sustainable development in practice, where the benefits from a renewable resource were maximized and costs to society were minimized. Ironically, our opponents' goal of saving bear cubs by abolishing the spring bear hunt likely resulted in the death of even more cubs as a result of cannibalism by large male bears, because these bears were no longer being targeted by hunters in the spring.

In early 2014 we received news that, in response to increasing human-bear conflicts, our provincial government was considering reopening the spring bear hunt on a limited basis to address concerns about public safety. Not surprisingly, animal-rights activists were furious at the government's proposal and launched a legal challenge, and even received an endorsement from former *Price is Right* host and animal rights advocate Bob Barker. In part, they claimed that the spring bear hunt would result in cub orphaning, and therefore contravened Canada's animal cruelty legislation. Apparently they weren't aware that the

Many hunters feel that the pilot project was designed to fail. Annual variations in weather will continue to contribute to the number of human-bear conflicts in a given year, but a spring bear hunt can certainly help by reducing the density of bears that are typically involved in conflicts (males between one and five years old).

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legislation is limited to *willful and deliberate* acts of neglect and abuse, and therefore doesn't apply to the accidental shooting of encumbered sows (nor would it apply if you accidentally hit a sow accompanied by a cub with a vehicle). The court dismissed the case and Ontario's bear hunters were set to experience their first spring bear hunt in 15 years.

But this spring bear hunt looks very different from what occurred in the 1990s—it is being reinstated as a two-year pilot project, it is limited to residents of Ontario, and it only applies in eight Wildlife Management Units (all of which are in northern Ontario), instead of the 70+ units that had a spring hunt prior to 1999. Candidate Wildlife Management Units were chosen based on the number of bear conflicts in those areas and included the areas around Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, North Bay, and Timmins. Municipalities in these Wildlife Management Units were required to opt-in to the pilot project. Like the fall season, use of baits and hunting with dogs is permitted, and shooting cubs or females with cubs is illegal.

It's all well and good to have a spring season on the books, but we feared that if hunters didn't capitalize on the opportunity to participate, then the government could take it as a sign of low support for spring bear hunting. So the OFAH used all possible forms of communication (print, radio, television, and direct mailing) to their fullest extent, encouraging hunters to show their support by buying licences early and participating in the hunt. The first season of the two-year pilot project ran from May 1 to June 15, 2014. Over 3,200 black bear licences were sold at this time, all of which

were valid for both the 2014 spring and fall bear seasons. Preliminary data indicates that about 850 hunters actively hunted in the spring season and those hunters harvested 193 black bears. Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is assessing the success of the pilot project by monitoring the number of nuisance bear calls to Ontario's police detachments and Bear Wise Reporting Line; the number of bears harvested; as well as stakeholder and municipal perspectives on bear conflicts. Ontario's black bear population is stable at 95,000-100,000 animals, and the current harvest rate of 6-8 percent of the bear population is well within sustainable limits.

By limiting the hunt to Ontario residents and only eight Wildlife Management Units, it's doubtful that the pilot project will accomplish the stated goal of decreasing bear conflicts, mainly because it was not properly designed for that purpose. Many hunters feel that the pilot project was designed to fail. Annual variations in weather will continue to contribute to the number of human-bear conflicts in a given year, but a spring bear hunt can certainly help by reducing the density of bears that are typically involved in conflicts (males between one and five years old).

As I write this, we are only weeks away from opening day of the second year of the spring bear hunt pilot project. It's not the full reinstatement that Ontario's bear hunters have been justifiably clamoring for, but it's a step in the right direction. Now we just need to convince the government that proper black bear management requires both a spring and fall hunt. This valuable resource and the people of Ontario deserve nothing less. ■



Ned A. Haas took this black bear in May, 1996, while hunting near Lake of the Woods, Ontario. The Boone and Crockett Club has 82 black bear listed as taken from Ontario. Out of the 82, 17 were harvested in May or June.