

A Survey of North Carolina Bear Hunters



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INTRODUCTION

The black bear is the only species of bear in North Carolina. Black bear populations in North Carolina have increased from the 1970s through the 2000s. While numbers have started to stabilize in many coastal areas in recent years, they've continued to grow in many mountain areas. At the same time, bears occupy more areas of North Carolina, and the human population has grown—increasing the number of human/bear interactions.

Bear hunting is the main tool for managing bear populations. People have been bear hunting in North Carolina since before European colonial settlers arrived. Hunters in North Carolina hunt both with and without dogs to pursue and track bears.

To more effectively manage bears in North Carolina, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is developing a long-range bear management plan that includes identifying critical bear management issues and determining public views on these issues. This study examined the views of North Carolina bear hunters on bear hunting and bear management.

METHODS

Focus Groups

In February and March 2005, researchers conducted focus groups in Buncombe, Caswell, and Craven counties with bear hunters to explore in-depth some topics related to bear hunting and management and to test a draft of a mail survey.

Surveys

A survey was designed with input from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission Black Bear Committee. The survey had items on bear hunting experience, bear hunting methods, views on bear management, views on hunting ethics, and demographic and background information.

In order to identify bear hunters, beginning in February 2005, survey postcards were mailed to a random selection of 50,000 people who had licenses that allow big game hunting. All nonrespondents were sent an additional survey postcard. In June 2005, 2,426 surveys were mailed to every hunter who returned a big game hunter postcard that indicated he or she had hunted bear during the previous three years.

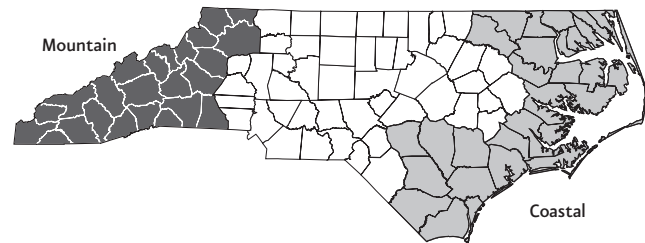
RESULTS

Regions

Bear hunting is allowed in the Mountain and Coastal regions of North Carolina (Figure 1).

Figure 1

2004–2005 North Carolina Bear Hunting Regions



Respondents

Big game hunters returned a total of 17,821 survey postcards. The adjusted response rate, calculated by omitting incorrect addresses and persons ineligible to respond, was 41%. Respondents to the second mailing (16%) were more likely to report not hunting any big game species than respondents to the first mailing (12%). Therefore, big game hunters who hunted one or more species during the past three years may have responded to the survey postcard at a higher rate than those who did not hunt during the past three years.

Of the 2,426 bear hunters identified from the survey postcards who were mailed surveys, 1,748 returned surveys, for an adjusted response rate of 76%.

Bear Hunting Experience and Methods

Most (64%) bear hunters spent 0–20% of their time bear hunting on game lands in North Carolina during the past three years. Forty percent of Mountain hunters and only 6% of Coastal hunters bear hunted more than 80% of the time on game lands.

Opinions About Bear Populations and Bear Sanctuaries

Forty-nine percent of bear hunters believed the current number of bears where they bear hunted was about right and 35% indicated bear numbers were too low. Mountain hunters (52%) were more likely to believe bear abundance was too low than Coastal hunters (Figure 2).

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has areas in the state designated as Bear Sanctuaries. With a few exceptions, bear hunting is not permitted on Bear Sanctuaries. Most bear hunters (79%) agreed that Bear Sanctuaries have been effective in increasing the bear population in North Carolina. Most (80%) bear hunters agreed that limited permit hunting should be allowed on Bear Sanctuaries. Most (52%) bear hunters agreed that the area in Bear Sanctuaries should be decreased in order to keep bear populations from grow-

ing too rapidly. However, 34% of hunters disagreed with decreasing the area in bear sanctuaries. Mountain hunters were less supportive of decreasing the area in Bear Sanctuaries, with 47% disagreeing that the amount of Sanctuary area should be decreased. Overall, bear hunters were split (30% agreed, 34% disagreed) on whether the amount of area in the Bear Sanctuary program should be increased.

Opinions about bear hunting seasons and bag limits

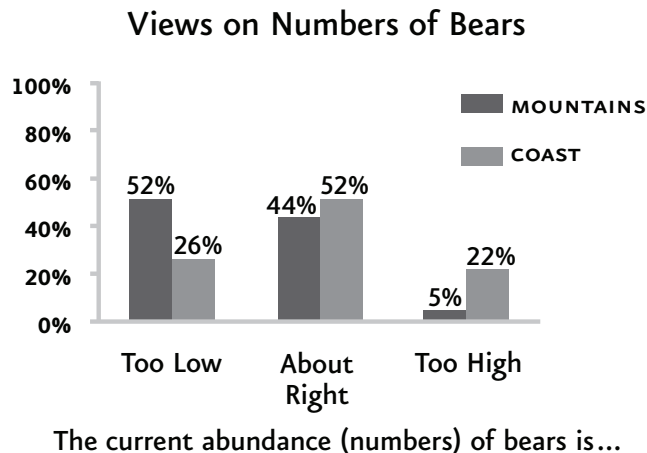
Most bear hunters (72%) supported how wildlife managers with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission managed bear populations. There was no difference among bear hunters of varying bear hunting experience in their support of N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission’s bear management strategies.

Forty-nine percent of bear hunters indicated the length of the bear hunting season in the county in which they spent the most time bear hunting during the last three years was about the right length and 46% responded it was too short. Most bear hunters (56%) supported increasing the bear hunting season length to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission bear population goals. Most hunters (72%) were opposed to decreasing the bear hunting season length to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission population goals.

Most (68%) bear hunters believed the timing of the bear season in the county in North Carolina where they most often hunted was about right.

Forty-one percent of bear hunters (35% of Mountain and 43% of Coastal bear hunters) supported having an archery season before the gun season to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission population goals. However, 36 percent of bear hunters (45% of Mountain and 31% of Coastal bear hunters) opposed such a season. Forty-six percent of bear hunters

Figure 2



(39% of Mountain and 29% of Coastal bear hunters) supported having a muzzleloading season before the gun season to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission bear population goals. Statewide, 32% of bear hunters (41% of Mountain and 29% of Coastal bear hunters) were opposed to such a season.

Most (68%) bear hunters agreed that they were satisfied with the current bag limit of one bear per hunter per season. Half (50%) of bear hunters were opposed to increasing the one bear per season bag limit to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission population goals. However, 36% favored such an increase. Mountain bear hunters (56%) were more likely to oppose an increased bag limit to meet population goals than Coastal hunters (48%).

CONCLUSIONS

Areas bear hunted

Mountain hunters were more likely than Coastal hunters to have hunted on game lands. This may indicate a high importance for public hunting areas in the Mountains. Or, this may point to a lack of opportunity for bear hunting on game lands on the Coast.

Bear Sanctuaries

Most North Carolina bear hunters believe that Bear Sanctuaries have been effective in increasing bear populations and many would likely support having limited permit hunting on Sanctuaries. However, there would likely be more opposition to bear permit hunts on Sanctuaries in the Mountains than in the Coastal Region. Decreasing the amount of area in Bear Sanctuaries would probably face substantial opposition; again, Mountain hunters would likely be more opposed to this than Coastal hunters.

Regulations that affect bear harvest

North Carolina bear hunters were generally supportive of how the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has been managing bear populations, as reflected in their general support (72%) of bear management and in their satisfaction with the timing of the bear season, the length of the bear season, current bag limits, and current bear abundance. Bear hunters also expressed support for changes to bear season structure if it was done to meet N.C. Wildlife Resources bear population goals.

Low bear abundance was more of a concern to Mountain bear hunters than those who hunted on the Coast. This may be why Mountain bear hunters were generally less likely than Coastal hunters to support measures, such as

having an early bow-and-arrow or muzzleloader season, which could increase bear harvest.

Raising the current bear bag limit would likely be met with substantial opposition, especially by Mountain hunters.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For more information on bears and bear management or for a full report of this study, visit www.ncwildlife.org.

Thank you to the North Carolina bear hunters who participated in focus groups or completed surveys.



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