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## Aspen meeting addresses one bear of a problem

Gathering held to address town's bruin crisis

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ASPEN — The summer of 2009 in Aspen made the kind of history wildlife officials and animal lovers don't want to see again.

Nineteen black bears — considered either nuisances or dangerous — were killed in the Aspen area, and another 30 were relocated as far away as the Colorado/New Mexico border. Of the 19 that were killed, at least two were euthanized because they had contact with a human.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife logged some 6,000 hours in the Aspen area alone to combat a bear problem Area Wildlife Manager Perry Will called worse than “anywhere else” in the state. There weren't enough area DOW officers to handle the crisis, so they were brought in from other parts of the state to help.

The problem was so bad that Will, and more than a dozen other DOW officials, along with Aspen police, Pitkin County sheriff's officials and elected representatives, gathered for a Town Hall-style meeting Thursday at the Limelight Lodge, where residents offered opinions and suggestions on how to manage the bear problem.

Ideas ran the gamut. They ranged from law enforcement having a zero-tolerance policy for businesses and residences that don't comply with the local bear-proof container law, to asking the Ute Indians how they manage to coexist with the bruins.

Former resident Hinton Harrison offered that restaurants should find a way to muffle the scent of the food they're cooking so that bears aren't attracted to the establishments, while local Bill Weiner suggested requiring property managers to advise long-term summer renters about the do's and don'ts when it comes to the bruins.

DOW officials didn't appear keen on all of the suggestions, including one to have a bear-feeding area, which, they said, would only compound the problem. And while they said they were not there to defend their two-strike policy on nuisance bears and zero-tolerance for dangerous bruins, they were questioned by audience members nonetheless. The two-strike policy in particular — in which a nuisance bear is tagged and relocated on the first call, and killed on the second — has actually saved bears, officials said.

“We were headed toward legislation that every nuisance bear would have been killed,” said Ron Velarde, northwest regional manager for the wildlife division.

That no-tolerance legislation for nuisance bears, Velarde said, prompted the DOW to create the two-strike policy. This summer, Velarde said his office was barraged with complaints and threats from people about the euthanization of bears.

“We get letters saying we need to die,” he said.

DOW spokesman Randy Hampton said the agency was willing to listen to many of the suggestions. And after the gathering, he said the best outcome for the meeting would be the follow-up participation, as it pertains to Aspen’s bear problem, from those who attended. Attendees were encouraged to provide their e-mail addresses to form an advisory committee that could work with elected officials and bureaucrats.

“If we get 20 e-mail addresses,” Hampton said, “this will be a success.”

Aspen’s problem with bears, DOW officials said, is not because of a single factor, but rather several.

The habitat here happens to be the most ideal in the state to support the bears. That’s compounded by the fact that it’s a resort town that caters to tourists and second-home owners, who aren’t as astute about the bear problems and regulations as the locals are. Toss a non-English speaking sector into the mix, and it’s the recipe for Aspen’s most recent bear crisis, said Hampton, who moderated the discussion.

And, as Velarde noted, there were no foreboding signs that suggested it would rival the bear crises of 2003 and 2007. The winter was moist, and the berry and acorn crops were bountiful. DOW officials didn’t expect the summer to be a robust season for bears, but their forecast was off.

“We’re always going to have a bear problem,” Velarde said. “It’s never going away because of the primo habitat we have here.”

Still, Velarde said he was hopeful that if residents are more vigilant about the bear problem, it will help contain the problem to the point that it is manageable.

“We are going to help you solve this problem,” he said, “but without your help, nothing is going to happen.”

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