

## Ontario Spring Bear Hunt—Clarification

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The article "Ontario Cancels the Spring Bear Hunt—Another View" in the May 1999 *International Bear News* (page 8) by Alnslie Willock, director of the Animal Alliance of Canada, perpetuated misinformation that may affect some people's view of Ontario's American black bear management program. Because of my intimate involvement with that management program I feel I must explain where the misinformation or confusion lies lest my colleagues in other jurisdictions think that we were asleep at the switch here in Ontario.

Ms. Willock states that she is delighted that "...the government presented the win as an ethical decision to protect about 274 bear cubs orphaned in the spring hunt (MNR figure)...." To those familiar with the situation in Ontario, this statement sounds as if the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) had conducted a study that indicated that 274 cubs were orphaned as a result of the spring hunt each year. Let me state emphatically that no such study was ever conducted by OMNR, in fact the best information OMNR staff had was that orphaning was an extremely rare event. So where does the number 274 come from and how did it come to be called an "MNR figure" on the number of cubs that were orphaned? Well, read on—it's a classic example of how information can be misrepresented.

In the spring of 1995, groups opposed to the spring black bear hunt in Ontario claimed during their campaign that 1-2000 cubs were orphaned each spring in Ontario—clearly an alarming situation, if true. I was contacted by one of our regional wildlife biologists, Ken Morrison, and asked my opinion. We agreed that the claim was outrageous, without foundation, and impossible. For example, over the past 15 years about 4000 black bears were harvested each spring in Ontario, about 17 percent of those were adult females. So about 680 adult females were harvested on average each spring. If every one of those harvested females had cubs (obviously impossible given the reproductive cycle of black bears, and the fact that females accompanied by cubs were protected from harvest by regulation), then 1632 cubs would have been orphaned (based on average litter size of 2.4). Ken suggested that something had to be done to counter the claims of groups opposed to the spring bear hunt, otherwise others would think that OMNR was being irresponsible in its management of black bears in the province. I agreed, and suggested that what he could do was to use the demographic data from George Kolenosky's study of black bears in central Ontario. Using the information on age at first reproduction, average litter size, interval between litters, and cub survival derived in George's study, and the historical harvest data for central Ontario, an estimate could be developed for the maximum number of cubs that could have been orphaned by the spring hunt provided that nursing females were as vulnerable to the hunt as other females. This last point is critical to understanding where the misrepresentation of the number 274

began. I worried at the time that people reading Ken's analysis would not understand how his estimate was derived or that results would be misrepresented. Remember, nursing females in the spring were protected by regulation, and numerous telemetry studies of black bears (mine included) have indicated that nursing females are protected from hunters by their own behavior, clearly nursing females were *not* as vulnerable to the hunt as other females. Nevertheless, Ken hoped to show that the maximum number of cubs that could ever have been orphaned (if nursing females were as vulnerable to the hunt as other females!) was much less than the claims of the groups opposed to the spring hunt.

So, using demographic data from George's study and historical harvest data, Ken calculated the maximum number of cubs that could ever have been orphaned by the hunt (discounted by natural mortality), assuming that no protective legislation existed and nursing females were as vulnerable to the hunt as other females. That is where the number 274 comes from. It does not come from a check station study of harvested bears, nor from an undercover investigation of hunters, and it is not an OMNR estimate of the number of cubs that were orphaned. It is an estimate of the number of cubs that would have been orphaned had OMNR not had appropriate protective legislation in place. And it is an order of magnitude less than that claimed by groups who opposed the spring hunt. Given that nursing females were protected by legislation in Ontario and by their own behavior, there is little doubt that the actual number of orphaned cubs was at least an order of magnitude less than the 274 figure.