

Bear scares in suburbia don't surprise the O.F.A.H.

Six years after politics killed the spring bear hunt, a major public safety issue has come sauntering into town.

Recently, in the outskirts of Toronto, Newmarket residents witnessed a costly operation involving a helicopter, several police officers, fire equipment and a tranquilizer gun that resulted in a 10-hour suburban bear hunt. Just a couple of days before, a black bear was killed by police near an elementary school in the heart of Peterborough.

"These two incidents are only the beginning of another season of nuisance bear hysteria in both northern and southern Ontario," said Robert Pye, Communications Coordinator for the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (O.F.A.H.) At press time, reports of backyard bears were making daily headlines.

As the O.F.A.H. predicted, bears are expanding their range into parts of southern Ontario including Newmarket and Peterborough – an obvious result of the government's cancellation of the spring bear hunt.

Pye said, "The O.F.A.H. continues to warn that a record number of bears wandering into residential areas means there's an increased probability of people encountering bears. It's just a matter of time before someone, perhaps a child, gets seriously injured or killed. The O.F.A.H. is adamant that the return of the spring bear hunt is the best solution for black bear management."

500% jump in nuisance bears!

Recently, the O.F.A.H. obtained the results of last year's M.N.R. *Bear Wise* program, a \$5.3 million public awareness campaign developed to help handle all of the complaints that the government now receives about nuisance bears. The results show that in the months that bears weren't hibernating, the *Bear Wise Hotline* received 14,550 calls, from as far north as Red Lake and as far south as the Greater Toronto Area.

Until recently, few M.N.R. offices maintained nuisance bear records. The records that do exist for the 1995 to 1998 period (before the hunt was canned) showed that the M.N.R. received a total of 2,600 nuisance bear complaints. From 1999 to 2002 (years without a spring bear hunt) these same offices received 12,426 nuisance bear calls. That's a whopping 500 percent increase in nuisance bear complaints since the cancellation of the spring bear hunt. Meanwhile, the province of Manitoba, which has an annual spring bear hunt, experienced no change in nuisance bear calls over the same time period.

But the government is careful not to comment on what is so blatantly obvious to most Ontario residents, especially O.F.A.H. members.



This is what happens when politics trumps wildlife management

Instead, *Bear Wise* operators have rehearsed the government line and, if called today, they will tell you that dry weather and shortage of berries has more people seeing bears. They may also offer advice on how to bear proof your residence by putting away dog food bowls, securing garbage containers or emptying backyard bird feeders.

Meanwhile, hundreds of bears will be shot and wasted (and not reported) by frustrated property owners worried about protecting their family, pets and livestock. "Shoot, shovel, and shut up" has become the unofficial practice throughout bear country.

"It's a sad commentary about how a once properly managed and highly valued big game species has quickly become a significant public liability and an easily expendable pest," said Pye.

Access saved in Northeastern Ontario

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters received a round of applause for its hand in saving public access to Highway 652, a major passage to lakes and Crown land fishing and hunting destinations in northeastern Ontario.

"For the O.F.A.H.'s support we will be forever grateful as should all residents using this public travel corridor in future years," wrote the Cochrane Ratepayers Cooperative Inc., a group of local advocates that share the Federation's concern for fair public access.

"With the support of the O.F.A.H., our co-op and its subgroup *The Highway 652 Action Group*," we successfully reversed the provincial government's decision to divest this major highway corridor in northeastern Ontario to private interests within the forest products industry. Our common concern for public safety and unhindered access to many lakes and recreational opportunities was heard. Highway 652 is still a safe public highway."