

The bear facts: what's a bunch of starving cubs when there are votes to be had

Because Kathleen Wynne was a bit of an outsider ? Ontario's first female and openly gay premier ? I had hoped that transparency and citizen democracy would benefit, and policy would derive from logic and compassion. I was wrong.

Prior to 1999, in addition to a fall hunt, it was legal in Ontario to hunt black bears in the spring. Bait, often sweet pastry and fats, would be placed in front of blinds or tree stands ? and the bears, ravenous from months in their dens without food, would approach. They were easy targets. Although many local hunters opposed the practice, they usually remained silent because it did bring money into the more remote, northern areas.

Hunters were only supposed to shoot males, but too often they shot females.

The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) estimated, from the number of females shot, that up to more than approximately 270 cubs were orphaned each spring. Cubs are dependent on their mothers; so, when orphaned, they tend to die from predation or slowly starve to death. The few who survived were brought to wildlife rehabbers ? but most simply died, lost in the bush.

Concerned citizens were able to convince the Ontario government to end the spring hunt. But, the fall hunt was extended, and the overall number of bears killed by hunters was nearly the same as before.

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) was outraged, and started a massive campaign of bear reporting. In 2003, a Nuisance Bear Review Committee recommended that the MNR take a lead role in responding to ?nuisance? bear reports, including threats to human safety. Thus, the MNR's Bear Wise program was born.

Although the program was successful, OFAH continues to claim it was not. And while there was, on average, no increase in conflicts between humans and bears, attacks on humans by bears, or the size of the bear population, OFAH and others somehow argued that all three increased. The campaign also pushed a very emotive button among people in Northern and central Ontario, suggesting that the government was more responsive to the concerns of the larger population living in the more urbanized south (where bears are rare or absent, but votes are numerous).

In 2008, then-Minister of Natural Resources, Donna Cansfield, wisely ordered an assessment of Bear Wise. Published in January 2009, the assessment presented dozens of suggestions on how it could improve. The next year, then Premier McGuinty removed Cansfield as the minister.

In May 2012, McGuinty quietly, and without consultation, conducted a massive scale-back of the Bear Wise program. Then, in October, he abruptly quit, handing leadership of the party, thus the province, to Kathleen Wynne.

And what did she do? We were promised a better, more open, and transparent government. But instead, the premier began the onerous task of dismantling many of Ontario's environmental protection laws including the Endangered Species Act, the Planning Act, the Bear Wise Program and re-introducing the spring bear hunt.

Apart from the sad fact that people seem to believe there are more bears and more conflicts (neither contentions supported by the MNR's own research), there is simply no way that shooting bears attracted to baits in the bush will mean that the same bear that might concern humans later on is the one shot. Shooting, itself, creates the risk of wounding bears, who can become aggressive. Bears tend to avoid humans, and the moms will not attack if their cubs are approached. But, availability of human food conditions bears to search for such foods ? ironically exacerbating the problems that concern people.

Now, in the winter, female black bears are in their dens. They are not truly hibernating, but their metabolism has slowed, and they will soon give birth to tiny cubs. Smelling bait, the females will move in, but will tell their cubs to hide. If a mother bear is lucky, she'll be recognized as a female, and spared; but she may well be shot, and then her cubs are doomed.

And why? Kathleen Wynne may think that, by making it a ?test? and restricting the spring hunt to several communities, she will not arouse too much criticism from compassionate voters (while placating those northerners angry at cancellation of the spring hunt back in 1999). What are a few hundred starving baby cubs when there are votes to be had?

By Barry Kent MacKay