

FLORIDA STATUS REPORT

DAVID S. MAEHR AND JAMES R. BRADY, *Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission*

For the majority of Florida the black bear remains a threatened species, while hunting is allowed in the relatively secure populations in Apalachicola and Osceola National Forests. Habitat loss continues to reduce inhabited bear range outside of Florida's public lands.

BEAR-BEEKEEPER

Several projects have been completed since our last status report. Concomitant to the results of our bear-beekeeper conflict survey reported in 1982, and experience with handling nuisance bears, we have recommended a capture and release policy for apiary-raiding black bears. In addition, because we demonstrated the effectiveness of electric fences, the U.S. Forest Service now requires beekeepers to use this protective measure on Forest Service lands in Florida. In the 2 years this policy has been in effect, the number of nuisance complaints have decreased. It is hoped that this policy also will be adopted on privately owned lands.

FOOD HABITS

Food habits studies were concluded after the analysis of 99 stomachs and 124 scats collected in all seasons over 7 years. General patterns in seasonal food habits as well as types of foods eaten by Florida bears are similar to black bears throughout North America. Several items, however, are eaten nowhere else in its range and reflect the tropical influence on Florida ecosystems. A few previously unreported food items include Armadillo (*Dasy pus novemcintus*), needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*), odorless bayberry (*Myrica inodora*), pond apple (*Annona gla bra*), and wild coffee (*Psycho tria lagustrifolia*). Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) is an introduced shrub that produces copious quantities of small red drupes which bears consume readily. At present, Brazilian pepper is restricted to disturbed habitats, however, bears have the potential of distributing this noxious weed species to remote, undisturbed forests of South Florida. The impact of this exotic on black bear ecology in Florida is unknown.

DISTRIBUTION

Our Florida black bear range map has been completed and awaits publication (see recent literature). Bears are still widespread in the State (occupying 50 of 67 counties), however, the nature of their distribution is very insular and fragmented. Because of the rapid loss of forested habitats in Florida, we are concerned about the possible consequences of a patchy distribution. As habitat islands become more isolated, immigration potential and gene transfer become more difficult. Ignoring the possible genetic consequences of isolation, as a population becomes smaller, extinction becomes more likely as a result of local, small scale disasters (i.e. mast failures, disease, illegal hunting, road kills, hurricanes, etc.).

We plan to supplement our distribution studies with satellite data in order to better define general habitat requirements such as important forest types, interspersions, proximity to human development, forest size, etc. In the U.S.. statewide analyses of satellite imagery are now possible, although still very expensive.

HABITAT USE

Radio telemetry studies of black bears in Baker and Columbia counties began in May 1983 and are scheduled to continue through, at least, 1985. Due to the density of vegetation and limited ground access, the majority of radio fixes have been taken from the air. Few preliminary conclusions can be made at this time, and our spring 1984 efforts will be directed at increasing our sample size. Generally, monitored individuals in Osceola National Forest seem dependent upon forested wetlands for most of their habitat requirements (food, den sites).

Pre-baiting and scent station indexing for black bears in Florida continues to be a problem. The 4 animals captured in 1983 were trapped at beeyards; still the best bait in Florida. The use of sardines, pork, donuts, and other baits and combinations have solicited no responses independent of apiaries.

HARVEST TRENDS

Black bear harvest estimates have remained relatively stable in Florida with the exception of the 1982-83 Baker and Columbia counties general season (Table I). However, this number was based on a post-harvest phone survey and may have over-estimated the actual kill. We foresee no significant changes in harvest regulations, although increased efforts will be made to monitor the black bear harvest in Florida.

TABLE 1.—FLORIDA BLACK BEAR HUNT DATA, 1974-1984.

Year	No. of Days Open	Estimated Kill
Apalachicola W.M.A. Special Hunts		
1974-75	23	1
1975-76	30	14
1976-77	16	7
1977-78	21	12
1978-79	21	12
1979-80	21	9
1980-81	21	10
1981-82	21	16
1982-83	21	12
1983-84	23	16
Baker & Columbia Counties (except Osceola WMA Special Hunts)		
1977-78	59	17
1978-79	57	23
1979-80	57	-
1980-81	57	30
1981-82	57	26
1982-83	57	50
1983-84	57	19
Osceola W.M.A. Special Hunts		
1974-75	9	2
1975-76	9	5
1976-77	9	2
1977-78	9	5
1978-79	9	6
1979-80	9	2
1980-81	9	6
1981-82	9	8
1982-83	9	6
1983-84	9	8