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Spring bear hunt worth millions – report

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Black bear.

Reintroducing the spring bear hunt would be a boon to many Northern Ontario communities with outfitting industries and generate millions of dollars annually for the province, according to the Sudbury-based Northern Policy Institute.

In the report Does the Spring Bear Hunt Make 'Cents?' policy analyst Mike Commito recommends the province reintroduce the spring bear hunt with a non-resident component on a trial basis.

In 1997, a provincial mail survey found that non-resident hunters spent \$25.2-million on spring and fall black bear hunting, Commito writes.

"History has demonstrated that non-resident bear hunting, primarily individuals from the United States, has been big business for outfitters and guides in Northern Ontario, particularly during the spring season (1937-1998)," he says.

"In the wake of the moratorium in 1999, resident and non-resident hunters have participated in extended fall seasons. The most recent data from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has placed the number of resident and non-resident hunters in 2012 at 16,378 and 4,843 respectively. Based on the cost of licences for the 2012 season, this amounts to an estimated \$1,825,693 in licence sales alone."

Commito's report concludes the current black bear population can sustain additional harvesting, adding that other provinces such as British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador all offer spring bear hunting opportunities.

According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, the current black bear population in Ontario, estimated to be between 85,000 and 105,000, can sustain additional hunting in the spring, Commito writes. The ministry estimates that the current black bear population can withstand a 10% harvest threshold.

"While the 10% harvest rate is generally applicable across the province, it could be too high in certain parts of Ontario's Boreal Forest region, so it is important to keep stock of these local variances in terms of acceptable harvest rates," he says.

"... Going back through the last 14 seasons from 1999 to 2012, the estimated combined legal harvest for trappers and hunters is 75,754 black bears. This gives an expected annual average of 5,411 and therefore places Ontario in an acceptable harvest range of 5% to 6% of the total population."

Earlier this month, North Bay council adopted a motion calling for full reinstatement of the spring bear hunt, suggesting the status quo is not adequately addressing the problem of nuisance bears in the North.

Some council members lamented that the Ministry of Natural Resources lacks the resources to trap and relocate problem bears.

The council motion, tabled by Coun. Mac Bain noted that the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters supports the bear hunt as a successful wildlife management tool to minimize dangerous encounters between people and black bears. It also indicates that the organization says the annual hunt used to contribute more than \$40 million annually to Ontario' economy, mainly in the North.

In addition, the motion calls for the hunt to be reinstated even as the province reviews the results of a two-year pilot project that saw a limited return of the hunt in parts of Northern Ontario, including North Bay.


The second and final year of Ontario's spring bear hunt pilot project wrapped up June 15 and the province has indicated it is still looking at the results.

The two-year pilot involved a limited, residents-only hunt in eight of 95 wildlife management units in Ontario - areas of highest bear incidence, including North Bay, Timmins, Thunder Bay, Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie. Preliminary data showed that 847 residents reported participating in the 2014 early hunt and that 193 bears were harvested.

The former Tory government, under former premier Mike Harris, banned the hunt in 1999 in response to pressure from animal welfare organizations claiming the hunt was unethical because bear cubs were orphaned too young to survive in the wild.

The issue has remained controversial ever since, with many Northern residents blaming nuisance bear problems on the cancellation of the hunt.

Does the Spring Bear Hunt Make 'Cents?' can be found on our website at www.northernpolicy.ca.

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