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Spring bear hunt debate begins



By Jim Moodie, The Sudbury Star
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While the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry isn't saying yet what shape, if any, a spring bear hunt will take next year, it certainly isn't arguing with a think tank's position that a fully revived hunt would goose the Northern economy.

"It's not anything new," said Bill Mauro, the Natural Resources minister and member for Thunder Bay-Atikokan, in reference to a paper issued last week by the Northern Policy Institute. "I think everyone is aware that when the hunt was cancelled in 1999 by the Conservatives, the hit to the economy in Northern Ontario, in 1999 dollars, was estimated to be about \$40 million at that time."

Were the province to open up the spring hunt to non-residents, it would reap as much as "\$1,825,693 in licence sales alone," argues Sudbury analyst Mike Commito in the NPI report. Meanwhile, thousands more would be pumped into the local economy through guiding arrangements, accommodations and food and gas purchases.

"We're completely aware of that," said Mauro. "And we're completely aware that if something like that were to occur, there would be a benefit to the economy if it were to include non-resident hunters."

His ministry is still assessing data, however, on the effectiveness of the partial spring seasons that occurred in select Northern wildlife units over the past two years.

"What we're doing is evaluating the pilot numbers," he said. "The first year of the pilot, which was predicated on our concern with human-bear interactions, yielded a very low number of bears being harvested."

In 2014, the take among resident hunters (non-residents were not included in the pilot) was just 193 bears.

That's a tentative figure, based on reports from just over 50% of hunters, but even if the figure doubled it would represent a small impact on the overall bear population, estimated to be about 100,000 in Ontario. (Of those, some 5,000 roam the wilderness in the Sudbury district.)

"It wasn't a complete surprise," said Mauro of the smallish harvest last spring. "As a northerner, I was aware that most of the activity related to bear hunting tended to be from non-resident hunters. But we weren't sure if that would have changed."

Mauro said the ministry still needs to analyze the figures from the 2015 hunt, but he isn't anticipating a significant change.

"We'll see what occurs with the second-year pilot numbers," he said. "We don't have those yet. But if we were to assume that there isn't any great change, we will then be considering what, if any, changes we will make to the program in its current form."

Were the province to approve an expanded spring hunt, open to U.S. hunters and other foreigners, there is no reason that season couldn't be in place by next spring, said the minister.

"It doesn't require legislation; it's a regulatory change," he said. "Should we make any changes and choose to have a new reg in place for next year, I'm assured the timeline and the runway are there for us to do something."

Mauro is on record as supporting a spring bear hunt, having tabled a private member's bill in 2013 calling for its reinstatement.

"Subsequent to my introduction of that, we then came forward as a government with the pilot program," he said. "So, we will be credible to that process."

Cambrian wildlife biologist Josef Hamr is a critic of the spring hunt, arguing it's unsporting to bait an animal that has just emerged from hibernation and is ravenous, not to mention has young cubs that could potentially be left orphaned.

But he won't be surprised if the province does reinstate a full season.

"I think that they were heading in that direction with their pilot program anyway," he said. "They just need to justify it and probably are trying to put some science behind it, which is pretty hard to do with just a couple of years of limited hunting with residents only."

Hamr has reviewed the Northern Policy Institute document, titled Does the Spring Bear Hunt Make 'Cents'?, and quibbles with some of its reasoning.

"Aside from the ethics of hunting animals over bait, I have a few exceptions to their figures, because the economy is not what it used to be in the 1990s and 1980s," he said. "The Americans used to come here in large numbers partly because the U.S. dollar and economy were stronger in those days, and also they had no hassles at the border."

Americans have travelled far less since 9/11, he said, and "a lot of fishing resorts on the French River have closed down because the Americans aren't coming."

Hamr has long opposed the argument that hunting bears in the spring will substantially impact nuisance bear activity. Far more significant, from his own research, are patterns of natural food abundance, and this year is a perfect example.

"Whenever there's a bad bear year, it's always coincided with low berry availability, especially blueberries," he said.

As prominent as bears have been in Sudbury this summer, though, the biologist said there have been worse years for bruins coming into town.

"I've gone through some years where we (the college) were actually doing bear control, and 2001 comes to mind right away as one that was just insane," he said. "We had thousands of phone calls and I think we moved over 200 bears. In comparison to that, this year was nothing."

Tara Pitz, co-founder of a recently formed group called the Sudbury Animal Rights Association, said there are too many organizations sowing misinformation and fear of bears, and not enough voices speaking up on behalf of the animals.

"One of the main things with the spring hunt is it's become extremely politicized," she said. "I'm obviously against it for a lot of reasons."

Rather than increase hunting at a time when the animals are vulnerable, Pitz would prefer to see more respect paid to the species and an acknowledgement that humans are impacting their food supply through habitat disruption and fruit harvesting.

"We have the option to get food at the grocery store, but we go out and pick their food, and then get upset when they come into town looking for something," she said.

While commuting to work in Sudbury from her Noelville home, Pitz said she's often come across a fleet of cargo vans on the side of the southeast bypass that she believes belong to a berry-picking outfit based in southern Ontario.

"When we're taking all the bears' food, they're not going to just sit there and say, 'Oh no,'" she said. "They're definitely going to do what they need to in order to survive."

Too often, though, a bear that is deemed a nuisance is simply shot, she said, as has occurred several times this summer, both at the hands vigilantes and police.

"The MNR and the police are going back forth, saying 'that's not my role,' because there isn't enough funding," she said. "And what happens then is that it's almost easier to kill them. But just because it's easier doesn't mean it's right."

Three cubs from mothers dispatched in recent weeks have been rounded up by ministry bear technicians and sent to the Bear With Us sanctuary near Huntsville, but a couple of cubs are still unaccounted for.

Hamr said it's possible a cub born this year could survive the winter, but "most of them don't, especially if the mothers are shot in early summer."

He said a study done by the Ministry of Natural Resources in the 1970s on the survival of orphaned cubs "determined that if they are 40 pounds or over, their chances of survival are better," he said. "But if they are under 30 pounds, they generally didn't make it through the winter."

While a cub whose mother was shot in August would conceivably be in the 40-plus-pound range, that's not a given in a year of such meagre wild food.

The good news, said Hamr, is that even though the blueberry crop was a bust, more food sources are now becoming available for bears.

"It should be better because there have been quite a few raspberries and chokecherries now," said the biologist. "There are hazelnuts, as well, and there seems to be a good crop of acorns coming in."

jim.moodie@sunmedia.ca

Poll


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Wednesday, August 26, 2015

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