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Why reviving Ontario's spring bear hunt would be good for economy



ASHLEY CSANADY | September 15, 2015 | Last Updated: Sep 16 8:49 AM ET
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A man loads a hunted black bear into a truck in this file photo. Should Ontario renewed its spring bear hunt to bolster the northern economy?

Mel Evans/ Associated Press

An investigation from a U.K. paper claims to blow open Canada's secret history of black bear hunting, but that's old news in Ontario where the spring bear hunt has been a source of controversy for decades.

It's easy to be outraged by videos that show hunters, cozy in their blinds, baiting bears to shoot them dead, as described in depth by Britain's Daily Mirror this week, which piggybacked on outrage over big-game hunting in Africa to take aim at North America's booming trade. It's a lot harder to consider the cold hard economic facts, the dollars and cents, that drive the annual hunt and have renewed calls to resuscitate Ontario's spring bear hunt.

"It might be abhorrent to some people, it might be shocking to some people... but what you see there for many people is essentially how a bear hunt plays out," said Mike Commito, a policy analyst with Ontario's Northern Policy Institute, and author of a new report arguing the economic case for a spring bear hunt.



Sitting on a platform along with his friends Reed Sutley watches two bears move in to a clearing before being handed a high-powered hunting rifle. YouTube

POST POINTS Earn rewards for being a loyal National Post Reader. Each year, thousands of black bears are shot and killed in Ontario; the licenses to hunt them and the **Follow "National"** crucial part of small-town northern Ontario's economy,

which has been battered by high hydro rat

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and structural economic challenges.

Many people don't realize that

“Many people don't realize that there still (fall or spring) bear hunt,” Ontario Minist

r hunt in Ontario

and almost every other province in the country also has a ro said Tuesday.

In fact, the government-sanctioned fall hu... people go online to tweet their outrage.

s far from the Toronto condos and suburban yards where

“If you haven't been hunting before, or if you're not familiar with the activity and the role it plays in the economy... it's an important part of the local economy here in Northern Ontario, it's part of longstanding traditions and culture up here as well,” Commito said from his office in Sudbury.



Black bear hunting has been government-sanctioned in Ontario since 1937. Cheryl Senter/ Associated Press

The debate, however, is much older than social media. In 1999, the province cancelled the spring bear hunt after years of campaigns that framed it as a slaughter that left cubs to starve after their mothers died. But hunting lodges and tour operators faced their own death sentences after its cancellation. Many outdoorsmen took their business to Alberta or Quebec, though some continued to frequent the province for the fall cull that continued unabated. Those who run hunting companies and tour operators continue to call for the hunt's return, and NPI's report lends credence to their case.

Simply selling the licences garners millions for the provincial treasury: the NPI report estimates annual black-bear hunting licenses garnered over \$1.8 million for the ministry of natural resources in the 2012/13 fiscal years. It estimates hunters from Ontario can inject as much as \$9 million into the provincial economy, based on historic figures, and tourists another \$18 million — and that's since the spring hunt was cancelled, in 2002, and inflation alone would boost that figure today. In a nearly \$600-billion provincial economy, that might sound like chump change, but for the mom-and-pop tour operators and hunting lodges that anchor some of the province's smallest local economies, it's big business. Business that could boon with a restoration of the spring hunt.



Vancouver police and conservation officers track down a black bear on the loose in the Knight and 53rd St area of Vancouver, BC., April 28, 2015. Nick Procylo/ Postmedia files

In 2014, the province sold 17,509 licences to provincial residents and another 4,708 to non-residents, who must be accompanied by a licensed guide on their hunts. So far this year, they've sold 12,546 licences to residents, and 4,558 to visitors. Each license allows the holder to kill one black bear, but usually only about 5,000 are successfully hunted each year. In 2013, the last year for which data was readily available, 20,851 licenses were sold and 4,724 black bears were killed by hunters.

It sounds like a lot, but it's not more than what Ontario's black bear population can absorb, Commito said. There are about 100,000 of the great beasts in the province, and some suggests the population could absorb a 10 per cent cut each year, though Commito says ecological preservation must be carefully balanced against tradition and economic realities.

But he still believes the province should permanently renew the spring bear hunt, which is revamped as a two-year pilot project in 2014. Minister of Natural Resources Bill Mauro said Tuesday that he has yet to decide whether it will be permanently revived this coming April.



A York Regional Police officer takes aim at a black bear in a Newmarket, Ont., backyard on Monday.

GlobalNews via the Canadian Press

Commuto says there's economic evidence in favour of the decision and enough evidence to allay conservation concerns — if the program is properly structured.

“If a spring bear hunt season was reintroduced in the capacity we were recommending, we also recommended the government looked at curtailing the fall bear hunt,” Commuto said, pointing out the fall hunt runs from mid-August to Halloween in the North, and mid-September to the end of November in southern and central Ontario.

He said that needs to be done in conjunction with “Bear Wise” programs that teach visitors, cottagers and tourists how to discourage nuisance bears from wading into populated areas. He said the ministry has slashed program funding to the program, which he calls a “shell of its former self.”

Timmins-James Bay MPP Gilles Bisson, a New Democrat, said if the government wants to address nuisance bears, it needs to reinvest its in its own ministry, not simply bring back the spring bear hunt. He said if the province wants to stop bears being needlessly killed — not as part of a hunt but because they simply wandered too far into a city, as was the case in Newmarket earlier this year — it needs to re-invest in Bear Wise, which was drastically cut in the 2012 budget.

The provincial Tories, who cancelled the spring hunt when in government in 1999, are now more open to its return.

“We believe bear hunts play an important role in managing bear populations, help reduce human-bear interactions, and keep communities safer. Bear hunts also contribute millions of tourism dollars into local communities,” said Jack MacLaren, the party's natural resources and forestry critic.

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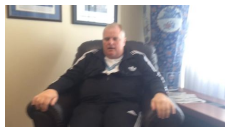
And it's that public safety line, the idea that the spring hunt somehow reduces negative contact between bears and humans, seems to be the argument that's taking hold for reinstating the hunt, though Commuto says there's “no evidence” more hunting would keep hungry bears from raiding garbage bins.

While aware of the economic impacts, Mauro said, “Our focus has been on the health and safety issue related to bear-management

and that's where it's going to stay," adding that since the spring hunt was cancelled, the black bear population has increased alongside those negative moments.

If the public safety argument — as flawed as it may be — is what changes the policy for good, it's the economy that will benefit, though perhaps not the bears.

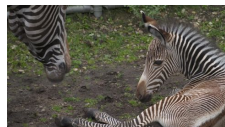
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Wes Forgio · Osgoode Hall Law School

Killing for sport, without a need for sustenance. This is something inferior minds are entertained by. Unreasonable murder for sport.

These people are evolutionary throwbacks. Like cavemen, for example.

I am not anti-hunting, if you eat the meat.

Like · Reply · 4 · 13 hrs



John Jafe

Umm, people do eat the meat, exactly why would you imagine they don't? Yes, I use the word imagine quite literally.

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs



Richard McIntyre · Ottawa, Ontario

My friend certainly doesn't eat the groundhogs and other varmints he kills on his farm. They are pests that cause destruction on his property. Besides, a 22-250 varmint cartridge tends to spread things all around when it hits.

Like · Reply · 1 hr



Steven Rotenberg

Bear is edible but not very tasty.

Like · Reply · 26 mins



Dan Alfieri

Even if you don't eat the meat.. What is sporting about baiting them and then shooting them while they are standing still? If you do that you are no more a hunter than the guy who dispatches animals at the slaughterhouse.

Like · Reply · 4 · 12 hrs



Bill Whatcott · Works at Self-Employed

No one is outlawing slaughterhouses, so lets not outlaw the bear hunt.

Like · Reply · 1 · 12 hrs



John Jafe

This is so silly, exactly how sporting do you demand it be? At some point in our history we used our brains to make tools, like spears, to help us kill animals for food. So, are spears ok, or are they also, 'not sporting'?

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs



John Jafe

Of course, if we did use spears you would next complain that the animal wasn't being killed 'humanely'. You are simply, and irrationally against hunting and are just hiding this irrationality behind the usual justifications.

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John Jafe

No province is better than Ontario at cutting of it's nose to spite it's face.

Like · Reply · 2 · 10 hrs



Bill Whatcott · Works at Self-Employed

Bring back the spring bear hunt! Hunting is good for humans!

Like · Reply · 1 · 11 hrs



John Alan Carr · Engineer at Maserati

Hey Bill...maybe we should hunt you...might be okay sport...just say'n

Like · Reply · 5 mins



Nick Daniels

I'm a bit concerned about a spring bear hunt with the cubs. I'm all for the fall hunt...

Like · Reply · 34 mins

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