

Florida bears need federal protection, conservationists say

HIGHLIGHTS

Petition follows controversial 2015 hunt

Hunt bagged a tenth of the state's population

State wildlife managers approved the hunt following increase in human conflicts

BY JENNY STALETOVICH

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In the wake of a controversial Florida bear hunt that bagged about 10 percent of the remaining population, conservationists say the state's bears need federal protection.

On Thursday, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Animal Legal Defense Fund submitted a petition to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service alleging that the state has badly mismanaged its bears and had authorized the hunt without having an accurate assessment of the population. In recent years, the number of road kills and the culling of "problem" bears has dramatically increased. Last year, 590 bears were killed statewide.

"At a time when the bear faces the threats of encroaching development, busy roads and a disastrous trophy hunt, the law must step in to protect this iconic species," Stephen Wells, the defense fund's executive director, said in a statement.

Last year, after two attacks and an increase in human conflicts, the state approved the first bear hunt in more than two decades. In just two days, nearly 300 bears were killed, leading wildlife managers to end the hunt early.

The hunt drew bitter complaints from conservationists who said that rather than kill bears, the state should find better ways to keep bears and humans apart.

Florida bears were taken off the state's list of threatened species about three years ago and are now estimated to number between 2,500 and 3,000, according to state wildlife managers. That's up from about 300 in the 1970s and has led to increasing conflicts in bear country in Central Florida. Until the hunt, vehicle collisions were the leading cause of death, ranging from 33 in 1990 to 285 in 2012. State wildlife managers also killed 108 nuisance bears last year.

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SCIENTISTS HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO SPEAK UP WHEN AGENCIES ARE NOT USING THE BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE TO PROTECT OUR WILDLIFE.

Adrian Treves, University of Wisconsin's Carnivore Coexistence Lab

“Scientists have an obligation to speak up when agencies are not using the best available science to protect our wildlife,” said Adrian Treves, who heads the University of Wisconsin's Carnivore Coexistence Lab. Florida's “apparent mismanagement of the Florida black bear not only puts the bear at risk of extinction, but appears to violate state and federal trust.”

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