

*DRAFT* Missouri Black Bear Management Plan

Missouri Department of Conservation



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## INTRODUCTION

The black bear is an increasingly significant wildlife resource in Missouri and while they disappeared from the state for a number of years, black bears are native to Missouri and represent an important part of our ecosystem. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) has authority and responsibility to maintain and manage the black bear population. As with many large game species, black bear management presents a number of opportunities and challenges ranging from providing the public recreational opportunities to minimizing and addressing human-bear conflicts.

The Black Bear Management Plan was developed cooperatively between MDC's Black Bear Task Force, and representatives from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. This plan identifies critical components of a multifaceted approach to management of Missouri's black bear population and provides strategic direction for the MDC's black bear management program over the next 10 years. By clarifying the MDC's bear management goals and objectives, this plan provides an opportunity for critical input from Missouri citizens on the future direction of black bear management in Missouri. This plan does not outline operational details (regulatory frameworks, specific research proposals, etc.), which will be implemented through established MDC processes.

Previous plans have focused on gaining an understanding of Missouri's black bear population, including determining a baseline population estimate, habitat use, and established range. Great strides have been made in this regard and it is now clear that Missouri has an established and growing black bear population. Sighting reports continue to increase and occur in new areas, a baseline population estimate was produced, and reproductive parameters are currently under evaluation to model population growth into the future. Missouri's black bear population is no longer considered vulnerable. MDC is experiencing a paradigm shift in black bear management from gaining base knowledge of a returning bear population to managing a growing and expanding bear population, including increased public awareness of bears, expanding bear distribution, increases in nuisance activity and increasing public desire for harvest opportunities.

Black bears occur throughout much of the eastern United States and Canada, including areas with dense human populations. In many areas, bear populations continue to grow and expand in range. In a survey conducted by bear managers in the eastern US and eastern Canada, 68% of jurisdictions reported increasing populations. Hunting is the primary tool for managing bear populations and 66% of jurisdictions allow bear hunting. Seventy-six percent of jurisdictions consider reducing or managing human-bear conflict as an important management issue (Eastern Black Bear Workshop Jurisdictional Survey 2019).

## **HISTORY OF BLACK BEAR IN MISSOURI**

Black bear were historically abundant in Missouri, but were seemingly nonexistent by the early 1900s. Many early county histories contain notes and reports of the remarkable number of bears in all areas of the state. Bears were a staple item for early settlers and were widely used for food as well as for their fat and skins. In fact, bears were more commonly killed by pioneers and early travelers than any large mammal, other than deer (McKinley 1962). However, by the 1830s and 1840s, bears were rare in north Missouri, and by 1894, bears were reported to be almost extinct in the Ozarks. Schwarz (1920) reported the bear was still present in southeastern Missouri in 1920, and they were “occasionally seen in the Bootheel” until the flood of 1927 (Godsey 1933). One of the last records of a verified wild bear in Missouri (during the early 1900s) came from this area, one killed in 1931 (Bennitt and Nagel 1937). McKinley (1962) reports no claims of bears being present in the Ozarks during the 1890s-1950s, other than rumors during the 1940s and 1950s. He acknowledged, however, that some rumors may have been reliable, and cites two incidents of bears killed in the Ozarks during the 1950s.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission initiated a black bear restoration program in 1959. During 1959-1967, 254 black bears were captured in Minnesota and Manitoba, Canada and released in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains of western Arkansas. Since that time the Arkansas population expanded in both size and distribution. Following the Arkansas reintroductions, sightings of black bear began to rise in Missouri, with some bears undoubtedly coming into Missouri from Arkansas.

From 1950 – 1972 there were 54 occurrences of bears in 27 counties in Missouri. In 1990, a request for sighting information published in the June Conservationist magazine resulted in 55 reports of sightings in 26 counties. Over the last 2 decades, reports have increased substantially. From 2000 – 2010, MDC received 512 bear reports in 75 counties. From 2011 – 2017 MDC received 1,341 bear reports in 87 counties. Reports are not verified, and likely include some percent that are misidentified, but in general, the distribution and number of bear reports is steadily increasing.

## **CURRENT STATUS OF BLACK BEAR IN MISSOURI**

Initial population research, which began in 2010, suggested a 2012 statewide estimated population of just under 300 bears. Based on bear sightings, and initial population monitoring, the bear population is growing and expanding, but the current growth rate is unknown. In order to model statewide bear numbers and estimate population trajectory, MDC began a project in 2015 to measure reproductive and survival rates of female bears in Missouri. Reproductive information will be incorporated into a population model which will be used to predict the growth and trajectory of Missouri’s black bear population. Current plans are to propose a limited harvest once bear numbers exceed 500 animals, a benchmark which was established in the 2008 Black Bear Management Plan.

## **MDC BEAR PROGRAM MISSION STATEMENT**

Use science-based methods to manage a self-sustaining population of black bear, a native species, while minimizing human-bear conflict, increasing bear awareness, and providing recreational opportunities for all Missourians.

### **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

**Goal 1: Use science-based methods to manage a self-sustaining population of black bear, focusing on research and monitoring, population management, and habitat management.**

- Objective 1.1: Use science-based methods to understand and manage black bear populations at multiple scales.
- Objective 1.2: Use research to establish biological and social carrying capacities for black bear populations within Missouri and seek to maintain those numbers through regulated harvest.
- Objective 1.3: Utilize research to understand black bear habitat use at multiple scales to better inform management decisions.

**Goal 2: Use human dimensions to inform management decisions related to recreational opportunity, and public opinion, interest and understanding of bears.**

- Objective 2.1: Utilize public surveys and other human dimensions methods to understand values, opinions and support of recreational activities related to black bear in Missouri.
- Objective 2.2: Use human dimensions techniques to understand the public's knowledge and opinions on black bears in Missouri.

**Goal 3: Minimize and address human-bear conflicts.**

- Objective 3.1: Actively promote proactive measures to prevent/minimize human-bear conflicts.
- Objective 3.2: Address human-bear conflicts.

**Goal 4 – Increase statewide awareness of Missouri's black bear population and management program through coordinated outreach.**

- Objective 4.1: Implement a coordinated in-person outreach program at the statewide level and within targeted geographies.
- Objective 4.2: Implement a coordinated multimedia outreach program at the statewide level and within targeted geographies.