

BC Bear Cub Killings: “Skinny” should not be a death sentence

Amending Ministry of Forests Guidelines Regarding Treatment of Black Bear Cubs

Issue

The Fur-Bearers is calling for changes to the British Columbia Conservation Officer Service’s (COS) approach in responding to reports of young bears, after a ten-pound cub was killed by a conservation officer. We are seeking changes to the government’s guidelines and approaches to address the following: 1) When a young bear cub is in perceived poor health condition, lethal force should be considered as the last option. Rehabilitators or animal health experts should be contacted first when dealing with cubs or potentially underweight animals. 2) The weight of cubs needs to be a factor in the decision-making process in whether a cub will be killed by a Conservation Officer; and 3) The health condition of a cub must meet a high threshold before lethal force is considered as an option.

Background

As the province’s public safety provider with a responsibility to respond to Human-Wildlife Conflict complaints, the British Columbia Conservation Officer Service relies on the Human-Wildlife Conflict Response Guidelines to guide their decision-making in the field.¹ Officers are also guided by the Ministry of Forests’ procedure, Preventing and Responding to Conflicts with Large Carnivores.²

The Fur-Bearers submitted a formal complaint to the COS in April 2022 over the agency’s killings of young black bears.³ In its response, the COS dismissed many of the concerns raised and failed to address the specific case examples introduced to highlight various issues. The Fur-Bearers is recommending the Ministry of Forests to review and amend its guidelines that the COS referenced throughout its response to The Fur-Bearers complaint. To support changes to these guidelines, we are providing one of the examples in our original complaint to illustrate the problems we are seeking to address.

Case Study

The following page provides a Human-Wildlife Conflict Report (HWCR) included in The Fur-Bearers original complaint. Also included are the notes from the Conservation Officer who responded to the incident.

1 https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-policy-legislation/fish-and-wildlife-policy/response_guidelines_black_bear_single.pdf

2 https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-policy-legislation/fish-and-wildlife-policy/4-7-04011_preventing_and_responding_to_conflicts_with_large_carnivores.pdf

3 <https://thefurbearers.com/blog/news-bccos-bear-cub-killings-prompt-formal-complaint/>

1020 - Report from ^{s.22}
 of bear cub at yellow
 gate on hwy 16. Gate
 to Weflands area rock
 pit 89
 1105 - Meet with ^{s.22}

Who was travelling on
 Hwy said cub (2020 cub)
 still there. Thinks it
 has been fed as it
 was eating on chocolate
 bar.
 1110 - 10-23 at gate Park truck.
 Cub came walking down
 road right to truck. Cub
 alert but looked skinny.
 Threw rock at bear. It
 came walking right back.
 - Advise Sgt Walker. He said
 to euthanize.
 - Cub euthanized. Extremely ⁷⁰
 skinny, weighed less

than 10lbs. could feel
 all bones on body.
 Pads on paws were discolored
 as well. Cub was a male.
 1200 - Rupert landfill. Return
 key. No wolf sightings
 since last visit.
 1230 - 10-23 Rupert. U/m
 1st Dr ^{s.22}
 - cub discarded in Port
 Ed.

Incident #: 20-29709

Date: 2021-01-20

Area: Terrace

Occurrence Notes: COM reporting a black bear cub laying down beside the yellow gate next to the highway. No sow around and COM observed bear eating a chocolate bar (COM thinks that the cub may be getting fed)

Narrative: 2021-01-20 10:50 – CO GEUZE met with COM on the side of the hwy. He advised that the cub was alone and was seen eating a chocolate bar. – CO GEUZE attended location and parked truck. After parking truck, bear cub came walking up road right to CO GEUZE truck. Bear was very skinny. CO GEUZE got out of truck and yelled and hit bear with a rock. Bear continued to approach CO GEUZE and walk close to the hwy. – CO GEUZE euthanized bear cub. Male cub extremely skinny weighing less than 10lbs. Pads on all 4 paws discolored and bear in very poor condition.

Complaint outcome: Destroyed by COS

Species: Black bear

Age: Juvenile

Sex: Male

Source: Ministry of Environment Freedom of Information request MOE-2021-15621

Source: Ministry of Environment Freedom of Information request MOE-2022-21379

Discussion

This incident provides an example of an unjustified use of lethal force and highlights the gaps in guidelines that led to the killing of a ten-pound cub. It also highlights numerous other problems related to the CO's response. These include:

- Improper documentation: The CO did not include key information in the formal HWCR that was documented in his notes. This includes the CO calling a superior for advice and the superior directing the CO to kill the bear.
- Failing to verify details in COM's report: the CO did not confirm whether the cub was eating a chocolate bar or was getting fed, therefore any decision-making consideration related to food habituation would lack an evidentiary basis.
- Throwing a rock at the bear: There is no rationale given in the notes, the HWCR, or the COS guidelines to explain why the rock was thrown at the bear after an assessment was made that he "looked skinny".

Notwithstanding these points, the primary issue is that the CO killed a ten-pound bear after receiving a kill order from his superior based on the CO's assessment that the bear "looks skinny". In our opinion, this assessment failed to meet the thresholds set in the CO guidelines:

- Human-Wildlife Conflict Response Guidelines
 - *Category 1: Black bears in this category pose a serious threat to public safety, have caused significant property damage and/or are injured or suffering from distressed health.*
- Preventing and Responding to Conflicts with Large Carnivores
 - *3.3(c) Large carnivores shall be destroyed under any of the following conditions*
 - *(iiv) The changes for survival in a natural habitat are low and it is considered inhumane to leave in situ, e.g. animal is in very poor body condition, is exhibiting very abnormal behaviour, or has an obvious and severe injury or illness*

As public safety providers, COs lack the qualifications and expertise that veterinarians, biologists, and other experts in the Ministry of Forests have in assessing the health and welfare of animals. The CO's phone call to a superior resulted in a kill order. A phone call to the Ministry of Forests may have resulted in a more accurate assessment of the cub's health and potentially a non-lethal outcome for the cub. A phone call to a wildlife rehabilitation centre may have resulted in this cub being rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Non-lethal options are the outcomes we are seeking in incidents of this nature. If cubs are deemed to be able to survive on their own, they should be given that opportunity. Otherwise, rehabilitation needs to be considered as the first option, and lethal force the last.

The killing of young, small bears with insufficient assessment calls into question the COS's ability and responsibility to protect wildlife, whose ownership is vested in the Government of British Columbia. Changes in policies and practices are needed to maintain public trust in the agency.

Recommendations

1. The guidelines used by the COS should incorporate weight as a key factor in the decision-making process in responding to wildlife calls.
2. 'Skinniness' should not result in automatic decisions to kill. More thorough assessments need to be conducted before any action is taken by a responding officer.

We urge The Ministry of Forests to consider the information we raise above and review its guidelines.