Viewpoints: New law prohibiting dogs in hunting successful in reducing bear deaths

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California bears face numerous threats, but thankfully in 2013 they were spared the harassment and death often associated with being chased by packs of dogs.

While sales of tags for California’s black-bear-hunting season stayed about the same as prior years, the number of bears killed was sharply lower. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife reported 1,002 bears killed by hunters between August and December. In 2012, 1,962 bears were killed. The 2013 figure is about 40 percent lower than the annual average number of bears killed during the past decade.

The numbers likely are down at least in part because Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature enacted a bill in 2012 making this season the first in which hunters were prohibited from releasing packs of unsupervised dogs into wilderness areas to chase bears – often for hours and over miles of terrain. Fish and Wildlife reports reveal that about half of all bears killed in California during prior seasons were taken by hunters using hounds to chase bears up trees, so the hunter can arrive, take aim and kill the bear. Unaided by this unsporting and cruel method, hunters were simply not as successful.

While Fish and Wildlife estimates that the black-bear population statewide exceeds 30,000, that prediction fluctuates significantly enough for bear biologists to doubt whether the state really knows with any confidence how the black-bear population – and notably, known subpopulations around the state that are not monitored separately – is really doing.
With regular news reports of bear conflicts in Tahoe and the foothill communities north of Los Angeles, there is bound to be a new narrative touted by the few Californians who still support trophy hunting of bears. These voices will attempt to worry the suburban populace with scary prophecies of menacing bears running amok through urban backyards and shopping mall parking lots. They will try to tap into the common misunderstandings that humans make about the nature of our relationship with animals such as bears. And this tiny chorus will predictably call for the state to relax other restraints on bear-hunting methods.

But black-bear hunting is simply not effective at reducing conflicts with humans.

For starters, hunters don’t kill the so-called “problem bears.” They target the largest bears, which they want to hang on a wall or use as a throw rug, not the young males who are primarily involved in encounters. Shooting bears based on size is as effective at reducing conflicts with humans as incarcerating large bearded men would be at reducing crime. Furthermore, hunting takes place far from where conflicts usually occur – in the wildland-urban interface. Suggesting hunting as a means for reducing wildlife conflicts ignores the fact that most encounters with bears are the result of irresponsible human behavior such as not disposing of garbage properly.

Arguing that hunting bears is needed to manage the population relies on an overly simplistic view of natural systems – one that conflicts with predation theory and scientific evidence. To wit, Californians voted overwhelmingly to end mountain-lion hunting in the early 1990s. If predator hunting was an important management tool, we would expect California to have experienced more human-cougar conflicts. Yet when normalized for the size of the cougar and human population, the risk of an attack by a cougar on a human is greater in 10 other Canadian provinces and western states where hunting remains allowed than it is in California.

Why are black bears hunted at all? In a word: tradition. Hunting quotas are set at levels that allow hunters recreational opportunities, not at levels aimed at keeping a lid on population growth. In essence, California manages for the sport hunt, not by it.

In a state where wildlife watchers outnumber hunters by more than 17-to-1 and bear hunters by 250-to-1, wildlife managers would be wise to countenance calm
in the face of alarmist calls. It’s a good moment to remind Californians that keystone species such as bears, mountain lions and wolves play critical roles in maintaining complete ecosystems.

Californians should rejoice that our legislative process successfully protected so many black bears and the dogs forced to chase them from needless suffering. We should take every opportunity to protect more bears – and ourselves – by educating our neighbors and friends about the best ways to avoid attracting them into our spaces. Resources such as new brochures developed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife can help homeowners, renters and campers make choices that promote peaceful living in California bear country.

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