

Can food lead black bears out of trouble?

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Everyone knows that food can lead black bears (*Ursus americanus*) into trouble, but can it lead them out of trouble? Mounting evidence shows that food can be a powerful tool in reducing bear/human conflict, depending upon quantity, quality, and placement of the food. Where necessary, diversionary food can be placed away from human habitation to minimize bear-human contact. However, residents commonly hand-fed bears in the rural community we studied for 8 years (1984-1991) and in the one we studied for 15 years (1996-2010). In the latter community, bears had been hand-fed since 1961 and were sufficiently habituated and food-conditioned that we radio-collared them without using tranquilizers. The low incidence of nuisance problems in these communities in northeastern Minnesota indicate that the driving force behind nuisance behavior is hunger—not habituation and food-conditioning, which tended to be specific to locations and situations. In these communities, we found that:

1. No one was attacked, house break-ins were rare, and nuisance complaints were fewer and less serious than elsewhere in the region.
2. As residents replaced misconceptions with close-up experience with bears, they became willing to coexist.
3. Where residents preferred not to see bears, reducing attractants was especially effective in reducing conflict because bears easily diverted to supplemental feeding sites.
4. Bears preferred wild food or diversionary food over going house to house for small rewards.
5. No bear became dependent upon supplemental food.
6. When natural food was abundant, bears went weeks, months, or years between visits to supplemental feeding sites.
7. Bears continued wild behaviors (foraging, mating, scent-marking, exploring new areas, investigating den sites, defending territories, dispersing, etc.)
8. Despite being hunted, the habituated, food-conditioned bears in these studies survived up to 26¾ years and included some of the oldest bears in the population.