

## Experts mull solution to city bear issue

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Anchorage residents love their creeks, their salmon and their bears, until they start to run a little too wild. The bears, in particular, ran wild this summer. Three people were mauled by grizzlies. A handful more were chased. One bear was shot because she and her cubs had become habitual threats to humans, a whole bunch of whom were so frightened they abandoned Far North Bicentennial Park.

The Anchorage Waterways Council on Friday night pulled together some experts on bears, fish and creeks, to discuss what to do.

"Obviously, bears have been a hot topic, a highly contentious topic," said Sean Farley, a bear researcher with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "We have some social decisions that need to be made."

The problem, as speakers quickly made clear to the standing-room-only crowd, is that those social decisions are tangled up in some sort of Gordian knot.

Almost everyone, and most especially the Waterways Council, wants to see Anchorage creeks filled with salmon. Along with being a sign that the creeks are healthy, the salmon, as Council executive director Holly Kent pointed out, nourish ecosystems with marine nutrients.

All kinds of critters benefit.

Unfortunately, grizzly bears - which can be a threat to humans - are among those critters. Anchorage each summer hosts close to a couple dozen, if not more.

"They're not really a wilderness species like we once thought," Farley said; they are simply a hungry species.

"Why the bears are here are the critical thing," he said. "It has to do with food. The bears are not here because they like us."

"I'm all for clean streams, and I love the idea of having salmon in them at the same time, but we've got unintended consequences."

Farley made it pretty clear that if people want a city safe totally safe from bear maulings, either a lot of the salmon are going to need to go, or the bears are going to need to go.

And there are a lot of people sure to object to the latter.

"The only way to reduce the brown bear attacks to zero is to kill all the bears," said area wildlife biologist Rick Sinnott with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Bear lovers, both in Anchorage and across the nation, go apoplectic at suggestions like that.

The bear lovers, as Farley noted, represent one end of the political spectrum. The kill-'em-all and make Anchorage safe element represents the other end.

Sinnott has found himself caught in the middle. He was Friday questioned about a Fish and Game proposal, one he has backed, to allow more bear hunting in Chugach State Park adjacent to Anchorage to, in part, try to reinforce upon bears the idea that people are creatures to avoid.

At the same time, he was criticized for what some thought was his unwillingness to kill problem bears, though he shoots some every summer.

"I, personally, have shot more bears in Anchorage than anyone else," Sinnott said.

A decision is made bear-by-bear about whether the animals pose a threat to people, he said. Animals judged dangerous are killed.

He didn't have a better answer about what else might be done.

There was a some discussion about education, but it's arguable whether that would have done much to prevent the maulings this summer. One involved a young mountain biker who either hit a bear or was grabbed by a bear in dim light. There's not much she could have done - other than stay home - to prevent that attack, and she was riding in a city-approved mountain bike race.

Another mauling involved a veteran trail runner who jogged past a bear warning sign and then was attacked by a sow with cubs, a sow that had chased people before.

Still, no one questioned the idea that creating a broader understanding of bears and how to behave around them is a good idea, and Elizabeth Manning, an education specialist for Fish and Game, said the agency is gearing up a summer program to try to warn hikers, trail runners and mountain bikers that they need to be alert for bears on Anchorage trails, and explaining what to do if they meet one.

No one offered any easy solutions to the problem.

Anchorage is uncharted territory here. There are no other major cities dealing with grizzly bears regularly roaming popular trails so close to so many people.

"Anchorage, as far as I can tell, is a unique city in this regard," Farley said.

The grizzly bear problem almost makes the other bear problem - that of black bears - look simple. A lot of communities have dealt with that issue, and it's almost always as simple, or as difficult, as getting people to keep their garbage, dog food and bird seed away from bears.

Freed from the temptation of those tasty attractants, Sinnott indicated, black bears disappear back into the woods to graze on natural greens. They might still be among us, but bears that are out of sight appear to be out of mind as well.

Farley noted his research in Far North Park indicated a lot of grizzly bears spending a lot of time close to popular trails, but no one got upset as long as the bears stayed out of sight, which raises one of those great philosophical questions:

If a bear is there, but you can't see it, does it still exist?

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