



Fact sheet about proposal to allow permit hunt opportunities in three Bear Sanctuaries in the Mountain Bear Management Unit

Reason for Proposal: The proposal to open permit hunt opportunities on three of the Bear Sanctuaries in the Mountain Bear Management Unit (MBMU) meets several objectives in the [2012 – 2022 Black Bear Management Plan](#), including the use regulated hunting to manage the bear population. This proposal also meets the objective for bear sanctuaries. The proposal may also assist in addressing local human-bear conflicts by locally managing bear densities, removing problem bears, and reversing human-conditioned behavior being observed in local bears.

Background:

The North Carolina Bear Sanctuary System

- In 1971, the Commission established 28 black bear sanctuaries totaling over 800,000 acres. North Carolina was among the first states to establish such a system of protected areas.
- The original objective of the bear sanctuary system was to protect a breeding nucleus of female bears and to produce a dispersing surplus of bears that could be harvested without detriment to the population.
- Currently there are approximately 490,000 acres of designated bear sanctuaries in North Carolina. North Carolina remains one of the only states that still has a system of designated sanctuaries.
- With the decrease in huntable areas, the recovery and restoration of the bear population, and the increase in human-bear interactions (Figure 1) and the severity of these interactions (e.g., breaking into occupied homes), the Black Bear Management Plan objective of the bear sanctuaries is as follows:

“Bear Sanctuaries are delineated areas where hunting mortality can be adjusted independently from that of the surrounding area to address local bear densities and to meet population goals for BMUs. Adjustment of mortality is achieved by regulating harvest pressure, which can range from no hunting to a hunting season consistent with that of the local bear season.”

- There are currently two bear sanctuaries that have permit hunt opportunities in the MBMU:
 - i) Daniel Boone Bear Sanctuary since 2009
 - ii) Mt. Mitchell Bear Sanctuary since 2006
- The three bear sanctuaries in the proposal are not being completely opened up to bear hunting. A permit will be required, as is required on Daniel Boone and Mt. Mitchell. Commission staff will determine the number of permits available, number of hunting days, and maximum party size for these permit hunts on a site-by-site basis.
- The permit hunts will follow statewide regulations (e.g., bear e-stamp needed to hunt, reporting harvested bear is required, mandatory tooth submission, bag limit=1, minimum weight to take a bear is 75 lbs., cannot take a female with cubs).

2012 – 2022 Black Bear Management Plan:

- 1) Black Bear Management Plan Statement of Goal created to meet the present challenges facing responsible management of the bear population:

“Use science-based decision making and biologically-sound management principles to manage black bear populations in balance with available habitats and human expectations to assure long-term existence and hunting opportunities.”

- 2) Black Bear Management Plan Population Objective for the Mountain Bear Management Unit:

“Stabilize the mountain bear population at the current level.”

Note: Current level was the estimated bear population in the MBMU in 2012, which was 4,400 to 4,900 bears. This estimate did not include the bear population on the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Thanks to conservation and management efforts by the Commission since the 1970’s, the MBMU bear population recovered from historically low numbers and is now restored.

- 3) In a 2005 survey of the public, a majority (77%) of the public in the MBMU supported the use of regulated hunting for bear population management, if wildlife managers determined it was necessary, and a majority stated they prefer the bear population to remain at current levels (Palmer 2006).
- 4) In August 2018, the Nantahala Ranger District formally requested that the Commission allow permit bear hunting on Panthertown Bear Sanctuary due to thee increase and severity of bear conflicts. This is part of an integrative management approach in which regulated hunting and food storage would be implemented to manage bear populations and bear conflicts.

5) Current status of bear population in the MBMU:

- Population growth in the MBMU remains robust at an estimated 5-6% annually.
- The population objective is to stabilize the bear population by reducing growth rate to close to 0%.
- The estimated bear population has increased to an estimated 7,000-8,000 bears since 2012.
- Using regulated hunting to achieve and maintain black bear population objectives is Objective #2 in the Black Bear Management Plan.
- Changes in hunting season structures in the Coastal Bear Management Unit (CBMU) have been successful in reducing depredation kills and human/bear interactions (Figure 1) in the CBMU, as well as achieving the population objective for the CBMU. The population growth in the CBMU had declined to 0% and this growth rate is meeting BBMP population objectives in the CBMU.
- The Commission contracted with the University of Tennessee Knoxville to estimate the bear population and determine bear densities within the MBMU. Using the results of this research, the Commission was able to verify current population trends and identify areas of high bear densities, which aided in identifying designated bear sanctuaries that could be opened to bear permit hunt opportunities (Figure 2).

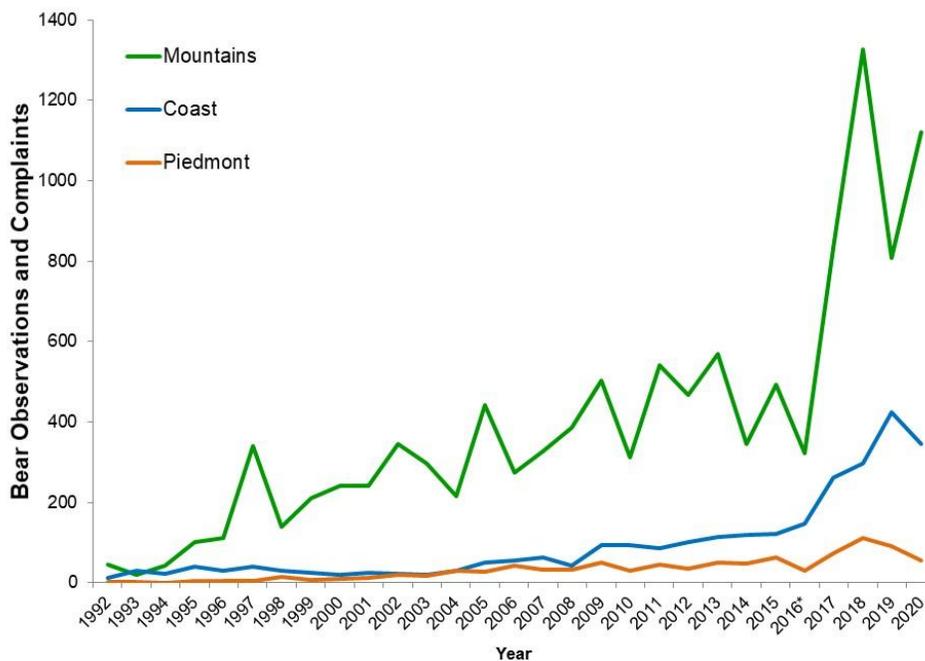


Figure 1. Number of human-bear interactions in each of the bear management units from 1992 through 2020. Note: In 2016 the Commission's Human-Wildlife hotline became active and was readily used by the general public.

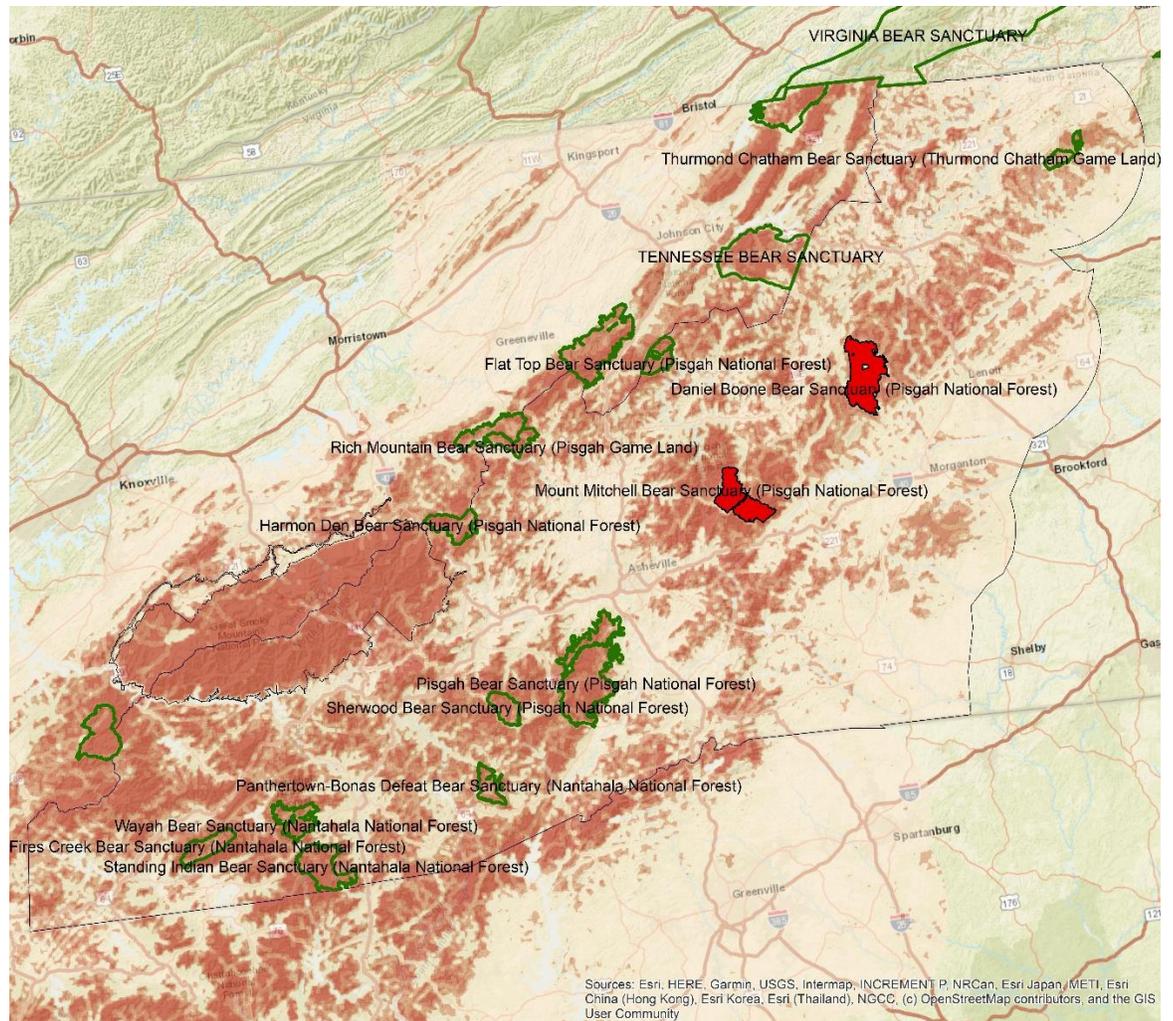


Figure 2. Black bear densities in 2018 across North Carolina. Designated bear sanctuaries with no bear hunting are outlined in green and designated bear sanctuaries with permit hunts are in red.

Resources: <https://www.ncwildlife.org/Learning/Species/Mammals/Black-Bear#2498423-surveys--reportsbrharvest--biological>