

It takes a village to keep bears wild

One night last winter last winter, while sharing a meal with friends, I looked out the window and saw a large black bear sniffing around my bird feeder. I should have charged out the door and chased the bear away. What I did instead was to turn the bear into the evening's entertainment. We all sat at the window and watched as the bear knocked down my bird feeder, and then flopped down on its belly to lick up the seeds.

A recent radio interview with Forrest Hammond, leader of Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife bear project, strengthened my resolve to be a better neighbor to bears. The Department is charged with managing the population of bears and keeping it at or below the threshold that humans will tolerate. They determine this threshold by the number of "incident reports" they receive each year, as well as the sentiments expressed at hearings held around the state. Based upon these inputs, the Department has set the target population between 4,500 and 6,000 bears statewide. Hammond estimated that the population is now at roughly 7,000. He said that he would love to see it stay this high, but that human behaviors are encouraging bears to spend more time in proximity to people, and incident reports are on the rise. Just to be perfectly clear, the population is regulated by hunting.

Bears prefer to live in remote tracts of forest. During certain years or seasons, there can be food shortages. These are the times when a bear is likely to seek the easy pickings near human habitations: birdfeeders, garbage, compost piles, bee hives, barbecue grills, and chicken coops. We all know the answer to the birdfeeder problem: don't feed the birds when bears aren't hibernating (usually April 1 -Nov. 30). And yes, bears can be awake any day of the year, so if you feed birds during the winter and have a visitor, keep your feeders inside until the weather shifts and sends bears back to sleep.

Compost and trash can be stored in bear-proof containers or kept indoors. Bee hives and chicken coops can be protected with electric fences. This is most effective when bears are trained to the fence. Do this by attaching

sponges or aluminum foil to the fence strands, and then spreading something aromatic like peanut butter or bacon grease on them. This will encourage the bear to touch the fence with its nose, the best place to get a good zap. All of this bear-proofing may seem like a bother. Can't a game warden just move a problem bear? Bears are not relocated in Vermont. The state is too small, and bears are too good at getting back to their home ranges.

Bears that are successful at finding food near humans, and discover that humans aren't dangerous, are more likely to make visiting homes a habit. This is especially problematic when mother bears bring their cubs along. These cubs grow up thinking that backyards are part of their habitat, and could lead to Vermont bears losing the inclination or ability to live wild lives. Even if you are delighted to see a bear, remember that bears range widely, and not everyone the bear encounters will share your feelings. Bears that think all humans are harmless will learn the hard way that this is not true.

We are talking a tough love campaign, folks, and none of us can do it alone. We need to make sure the whole village understands the need to keep bears wild. If you are afraid to yell and chase a backyard bear, have something on hand to give the bear a fright, like an air horn or bottle rockets. The next time friends or neighbors report seeing a bear in their yard, or post such a sighting on Facebook, you have a chance to spread the word. Let them know the ways to avoid attracting bears and the importance of scaring them away if they do come close to houses. Let's show that we can be good neighbors to Vermont's 7,000 bears.

