

# California rethinking how it manages bear population

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The life of a Lake Tahoe bear is a continual dance with death. Not because of the extreme climate and struggle to find food, but because their lives are so closely intertwined with those of humans.

A world-rekowned tourist destination, Tahoe is strewn with vacation cabins, year-round resorts and busy roads. In other words: many potential death traps for the region's native black bears.



Tom Millham of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care readies a bear to return to the wild. Photo/Randy Pench/Sacramento Bee

Last Wednesday, two yearling male bears got a second chance after being found last spring, injured and emaciated, in South Lake Tahoe.

The cubs are not siblings. One was probably hit by a car, left

for dead by its mother, but revived enough to stagger into a neighborhood, wildlife officials said. The other likely was orphaned, and began visiting Sierra House Elementary School in South Lake Tahoe, drawn by the daily smell of lunch cooking.

The cubs were nursed back to health over six months by Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care, a nonprofit that treats injured and orphaned wildlife.

On Wednesday they were on their own again after biologists from the state Department of Fish and Game moved them into a den in the wilds of Alpine County. The irony: These two bears owe their lives to people, but their continued survival largely hinges on their avoiding human contact.

"All it takes is one person causing a problem, and these bears can become a nuisance," Marc Kenyon, a Fish and Game wildlife biologist in charge of the department's bear program, said shortly after tucking the sedated cubs into their new den, a roomy niche in a boulder pile.

"What we hope is they don't find anything better, and stay here and set this up as their home."

Though Tahoe is the epicenter, conflicts with bears have become a statewide concern as rural areas have become more suburbanized over the past two decades. Bears getting into people's garbage and food has become a more common complaint.

One effort by Fish and Game to manage the conflict involved a proposal to expand bear hunting, which is legal in specified seasons and areas in California.

In 2010 it proposed new hunting regulations to allow 2,000 black bears to be killed annually, an increase from 1,700. After months of controversy, it withdrew the proposal amid strong opposition from wildlife advocates.

Now it is trying a new approach.

The department is preparing a new statewide bear management plan, one that will approach the species less as a hunting opportunity and more as a wildlife conundrum of statewide importance.

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