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Information Brief

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The Controversy over Bear Baiting

Animal rights groups and others have pushed the issue of "ethical hunting." The Minnesota Legislature has recently introduced bills prohibiting the baiting of animals. The last bill in the House to have a hearing (1995) would have permitted deer baiting during archery season. The bill died in committee. There is interest in Minnesota for legislation to ban bear baiting. This information brief offers some pros and cons on hunting bear with bait.

The Statistics

The November 1996 general election gave voters in six states a record number of anti-hunting ballot initiatives. Most of the initiatives called for a ban on hunting big game by means of baiting. Four of the states dealt with banning the baiting of black bear. Currently, baiting is illegal in 30 of the 40 states with viable bear populations.¹

Taking a bear, whether baited or not, is far from a sure thing. According to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), approximately 95 percent of bear hunters use bait.

Bear hunters' success rates in Minnesota have ranged from 13 percent to 43 percent between 1981 and 1995. The 1995 percentage rate was the highest ever; the DNR believes it was due to an exceptionally poor natural food crop. The average success rate for bear hunters between 1988 and 1995 was 34.9 percent.

In comparison, deer hunters over the last eight years have been more successful than bear hunters. The statewide annual success rate for Minnesota deer hunters using firearms between 1988 and 1995 ranged from 31 percent to 47 percent. The average for this period was 39.3 percent. The DNR estimates the current statewide bear population at about 20,000, and attributes this year's plentiful natural food crop as to why only about 1800 bear were taken. This was a 64

¹ Washington state passed its prohibition on baiting. The initiatives failed in Idaho and Michigan. An initiative that would have overturned a 1994 ban on baiting in Oregon also failed.

percent decrease from the 5,000 bears taken in 1995. Over 12,000 bear permits were issued for the 1996 season; the hunter success rate was around 20 percent.

The Argument for Bear Baiting

- ▶ Bear sightings in the northern forests are rare, even for experienced hunters. Baiting allows a bear hunter to accurately place a bullet or arrow. This reduces the number of wounded animals and allows for more humane killing.
- ▶ Bears seek food wandering over large tracks of land, unlike deer whose trail patterns are more predictable. When the natural food crop is plentiful bears do not roam as widely and are not attracted to bait sites. Baiting, for a hunter, is the only useful way to locate a bear in the woods. It is similar to using decoys to attract other huntable animals.
- ▶ Bear hunting is hard work. Harvest statistics prove that hunters using bait are only marginally more successful than those hunting bear through other methods, and less successful than those hunting other big game species. Baiting is the only practical means of controlling the black bear population. If baiting were eliminated, the DNR might have to deregulate bear hunting and not limit the number of permits. The bear-people nuisance problem could become extreme and many bears might be killed illegally.

The Argument against Bear Baiting

- ▶ Baiting bear is not fair and takes the sport out of hunting. The practice uses food to lure big game into an ambush.
- ▶ Tom Beck, a Colorado bear biologist, in a new book **A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport**, writes: "If hunting is to persist in America, it must operate within two sets of rules, one biological, the other sociological. While the biological rules set the outer limits for what we kill, the sociological rules dictate how we kill."
- ▶ It is extremely difficult to judge the size, age or sex of a bear, even at close range. Most bears killed at bait sites are not killed at ranges close enough (less than 30 yards) to allow a good look at the bear before killing it. Nursing mothers with cubs are sometimes killed at bait sites because of this identification problem. Many cubs thus become orphaned each year because sows hide their cubs before inspecting the bait site.

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