

Violating the public's trust: Hunting American black bears to “protect” people

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Wildlife management in North America has been guided by the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and Management (NAM), which specifies that wildlife are a public trust and should be killed only for legitimate purposes, while considering public values. Large carnivores, including American black bears (*Ursus americanus*), are critical components of multiple U.S. ecosystems, but their management history generally can be best characterized as exploitative and utilitarian. Over the last decade, black bear hunting has been implemented by wildlife management agencies in 83% of the U.S. states with resident bear populations, often justified as being important for protecting the public from bear attacks that could cause human injury or death. We analyzed black bear hunting data from all 34 states in the U.S. that had legal hunting seasons during 2000–2021, and we compared the results with confirmed bear attacks on humans, as well as social values trends from public opinion surveys. Based on generalized linear negative-binomial models, a strong positive relationship existed between the number of black bears killed by hunting and year (Pearson's $r = 0.95$; $p < 0.0001$), such that the number of bears killed by hunting in the U.S. increased at an annual average of 3.1% per year since 2000 (95% CI: 2.8–3.4), reaching ~47,000 hunted bears in 2021. In contrast, the frequency of black bear attacks on humans did not significantly change during that timeframe, and no relationship existed between the number of bears killed via hunting and bear attacks on humans. Further, societal values shifted dramatically, such that ~76% of the U.S. public currently opposes black bear hunting. Our findings strongly contradict the oft-invoked management justification that black bear hunting protects human safety and suggest that the broader public's trust was likely severely violated in recent years.