



Ecology Action Centre submission to public consultation on proposed Spring Bear Hunt in Nova Scotia

February 2024

The Ecology Action Centre does not support the proposed Pilot Project or the introduction of a spring hunting season for bears. Our organization is dismayed at the short notice and minimal public consultation given for such a significant potential change. Although we do not oppose lawful and ethical hunting, we cannot support the proposal to introduce a brand new spring hunting season in Nova Scotia where none has previously existed. There are a lot of good reasons why this proposal is misguided and must be rejected. These include:

Rationale makes no sense

The only rationale offered for proposing to create a new spring bear hunting season in Nova Scotia is that other provinces allow it. This simplistic argument fails to recognize that the context in Nova Scotia is very different than virtually all these provinces, which have much larger tracts of Crown wilderness lands, far from human settlements. Unlike those other provinces, Nova Scotia is relatively small, with its citizens and communities widely dispersed throughout that landmass. Put another way, no matter where you are in Nova Scotia, you're never far from somebody's home or community. Nova Scotia is also made up of 70% private land, whereas the larger provinces to our west have a much higher percentage of Crown/public land available. This means that the potential for conflicts and negative interactions between hunters and non-hunters and hunters and private landowners is much greater here than in the larger provinces with vast expanses of public wilderness. This difference needs to be recognized. It is also important to note that the vast majority of US states (40+), including the New England States, do **not** allow a spring bear hunting season. So, Nova Scotia is not actually such an outlier. The other reason given by proponents is that they "have been asking for this for decades." That is hardly a justification. It means that over those many years, dozens of different governments of all political stripes have duly considered and turned down this special request. Nothing has changed. The longtime refusal to grant this special request should be upheld by the government as it always has been.

Lack of evidence-based decision making

NS DNRR has not demonstrated a clear understanding of bear populations in Nova Scotia, which is an essential basis for making evidence-based decisions about changing the timing and level of hunting pressure on this or any other wild species. This lack of scientific baseline data about Nova Scotia's bear populations has been cited by DNRR staff many times in the past as a reason not to allow a spring bear hunt. Without the fundamental data that should inform this decision, moving forward with a pilot project spring bear hunt would be highly imprudent and would demonstrate a willingness by DNRR to tamper with our natural resources and native biodiversity while remaining largely blind to the consequences.

Opening up a hunt for bears (or any species) in spring or summer, when no other hunting seasons exists, will result in a significant increase in hunting effort for that species. The proposed new spring hunting

season will certainly result in a significant increase in the number of dead bears. DNRR Wildlife managers acknowledge that this is the most likely scenario. Without any actual population data to justify increasing the harvesting of black bears and without any caps or quotas, the precautionary principle should apply. It must also be noted that the world is in a biodiversity crisis with wildlife populations plunging by over 50% in the last 50 years alone. Among the steepest declines are large mammals. Now may not be the best time to authorize an increase in the recreational killing of a native megafauna.

Breaking the social contract

Spending time enjoying our woods and waters is both a right and a privilege enjoyed by all Nova Scotians. Hunters already enjoy a long hunting season for a multitude of game species including black bear in the fall. By and large, Nova Scotians are comfortable, or at least accepting, of this. There is an implicit agreement or understanding in Nova Scotia that there is a season for everything and everyone in sharing our great outdoors. For hunters, their season is in the fall and early winter. That's why it's known as "hunting season". The rest of the year is for everyone and everything else, and everybody gets along. This proposal would upset that balance and break the social contract with the general public. It also risks inflaming public sentiment against hunting in general.

If the government/DNRR has the data to prove that the black bear population in Nova Scotia is healthy enough to justify an increase in harvesting, and if the government wishes to provide more hunting opportunities for bear hunting enthusiasts, then we recommend simply extending the fall bear hunting season by a few weeks for their pleasure. If there are particular areas in the province where DNRR has evidence of overpopulation then a zonal regulation providing hunters in those areas with additional harvesting tags is also a logical management option open to the department. But we strongly oppose creating any new hunting season in Nova Scotia in the spring or summer months for any species.

Inconveniencing the many for the wishes of a few

Spending time in nature has been proven to be exceptionally good for people's mental and physical health. But many non-hunters avoid our woods and waters in the fall because they are not comfortable being out when hunting is underway and gunshots can be heard nearby. To protect themselves and their pets, those who do go out in the fall must take reasonable precautions such as wearing hunter orange clothing, staying out in the open where they can be seen clearly, and making human noise when in heavily wooded areas to avoid being mistaken for wild game species. Creating an entirely new hunting season in the spring would require the same adjustments and inconvenience for the vast majority of Nova Scotians, for the convenience of a small minority of the population. Spring is a very high-use season for Nova Scotians and tourists enjoying nature. Spring is a time of year when hundreds of thousands of hikers and walkers, anglers, campers, bird watchers, dog walkers, tourists, Girl Guides, Scouts, naturalists, wild berry pickers – and on and on – all flock to the woods. They do so, comfortable in the knowledge that there is no hunting at that time of year. To be clear: It is fundamentally unfair to displace or inconvenience the vast majority of citizens and visitors for the recreational pleasure of a tiny minority of citizens who would participate in a spring bear hunt.

Safety concerns

The notion of creating a whole new hunting season inevitably gives rise to safety concerns. The widespread practice of using bait piles compounds these risks, including the increased likelihood of non-hunters stumbling upon bait piles used by hunters to lure bears. The situation can quickly become dangerous if non-hunters accidentally interrupt feeding bears or encounter a female with cubs at, or near, a bait pile. A new spring hunt will increase the opportunity for these types of negative human/bear encounters by introducing potentially thousands of new bait sites at a time of year when they have never existed before.

Habituating bears to human food

It is a widely understood fact that people should not feed bears and that the results of doing so are bad for both bears and people. Introducing a new food source in the form of regularly stocked bait piles for a prolonged period at a time of year when these food sources have never occurred before will divert bears from their natural food sources to these new human food sources. Bears learn from their mothers and will learn to seek out bait piles and other human food sources instead of learning valuable foraging skills for their natural food sources. This will increase the likelihood of habituating bears to seek out human foods from other sources like cottages, campsites, and houses, thus creating more “problem” bear encounters.

As DNRR Minister Tory Rushton [proclaimed in the legislature](#): *“When accustomed to being fed, wild animals can lose their natural fear of humans or exhibit bold or threatening behaviours. Feeding also draws wildlife into populated areas, where the risk of injury or death is greater. This heightens risk to public safety and results in unmanageable wildlife populations. It also increases the risk of wildlife becoming dependent on humans for food, which is a key driver in human-wildlife conflict... When fed, bears lose their natural fear for humans. They will keep returning to the areas where they know that the food will be. Bears showing habituated and aggressive behaviours are considered a high risk to this public safety initiative.”*

Proponents of a spring bear hunt [readily acknowledge](#) that regularly stocked bait piles would create a whole new food source for hungry bears in the spring, going so far as to frame this unnatural food source as beneficial for the bears. In contrast, feeding bears human food in the spring will encourage them to seek out more human food all season long and will disrupt their natural seasonal feeding behaviours.

We support lawful, ethical hunting and the principle of Fair Chase. So, we also have to question the ethics of luring starving bears, after a long hibernation, to be shot over bait piles of human foods at a time of year when they are particularly vulnerable, versus hunting bears in the fall, when the bears have had a full season to feed and recondition naturally and to become more wary of humans. While the practice of bear baiting remains controversial, the animals at least have a more “sporting chance” in the fall near the end of their natural feeding season.

It should also be noted that British Columbia and the Yukon as well as the vast majority of US states (40+) do **not** allow bear baiting.

IF a spring season is granted, the use of baits of any kind should be strictly prohibited.



Slippery slope

Approving a new hunt for one species in a season with no other hunting opportunities will likely encourage more pressure for more concessions, including requests for more new open seasons for other species, thus compounding the problems and potential conflicts between hunters and non-hunters and hunters and private land owners. Similarly, although the proposed pilot project explicitly limits the hunt to Nova Scotians, demands to quickly expand it to non-residents will surely follow in order to commercialize the hunt, which will in turn further increase the overall harvest. In this regard, the proposed pilot project is a slippery slope that, if allowed, will quickly lead to demands for more and more concessions, from the government and the general public. We believe it is in the best interests of all Nova Scotians, including the wider hunting community, to let sleeping bears lie in this case.

