

Hair snares provide vital information for Florida Black Bear's survival

By: Corine Burgess

The Florida Black Bear may be the largest native land mammal in the state, but its size does not make it any less shy. The shiny black, furry creatures generally keep hidden in the dense vegetation and are rarely seen by humans. It is said that at one time there were approximately 12,000 black bears residing in the Sunshine State. Unfortunately, today the number has declined to about 1,500 because of development and loss of habitat. Scientists need information and data on this secretive, endangered creature if they hope to protect it from future extinction.

On July 14th, I had the pleasure of accompanying a group of research scientists to set a bear hair snare at the Sun 'n Lakes Preserve. It was a fascinating experience and I learned a lot about bears and how these dedicated people are trying to help them. Wade Ulrey, a Research Scientist from the University of Kentucky, Sara Kennedy, Research Technician and Hayes Paul, Intern Student all took part in the snare operation. The devoted trio is assigned to the South Central Florida Black Bear Project and is currently based out of Archbold Biological Station.

The hair snares are simply a couple of strands of barbed wire about one and two feet above the ground pulled tightly around four trees. The ground must be fairly level so that the wire isn't covered up by vegetation. A device made from compressed cotton, soaked in a fruity solution which attracts the bear, is hung by a string about 10 feet off the ground between the strands of wire. Pastries, doughnuts, pies and cookies are then placed in the middle of the snare to attract the sweet-toothed critter.

Once the bear gets a whiff of the fruit, it travels to the area. Upon arrival, a smorgasbord of sweet treats awaits it. The bear will move through the strands of wire to get to the food and leave a clump or two of hair behind. The barbed wire may leave a small abrasion or cut, but for the most part, the bear is unharmed. There is no real trauma to the creature and it gets a treat in the process.

Sites for the snares are chosen based on plant community type, preferred habitat and foraging areas. Obviously the site selections are in remote areas, "off the beaten trail," since bears are very secretive and don't particularly want to meet up with humans. Although the lingering scent of vacated humans at the site does not seem to deter them from their mission, which is to chow down on sugary treats.

The idea is not to capture the bear itself, but to snag a bit of hair. These hair samples are very useful to biologists. Hair follicles provide DNA, which provides plenty of information about the critter such as whether it's a repeat or new visitor to the area, the sex, and the relatedness to other bears. This data will help scientists discover the approximate bear population in an area, which will provide vital information in their protection.

The summer months are an excellent time to set these snares because it is breeding season and the bears are on the move. It's important for bears to travel around a lot and intermingle with other bear populations. If the bear is limited to one area, inbreeding occurs and the population weakens dramatically.

Historically, black bears traveled throughout the state from area to area. Fragmentation, which is the breaking up of natural areas, has caused many challenges for the furry creature. Today there are only about eight areas in the state where black bears live and roam freely. In an effort to find food and living space or perhaps a mate, they may have to leave the protection of one natural area and venture across highways and roads to get to another. Unfortunately, when enroute, they risk the danger of being hit by a car or truck, which is the number one cause of death for these beautiful animals.

Fortunately, folks like Wade, Sara and Hayes are being proactive for the bear's future. When asked why Wade chose Florida Black Bears for his Master's thesis, he simply stated that "bears are cool." And he's right, bears are interesting animals and certainly worthy of our protection. Because of research such as these hair snares, scientists are able to figure out where the bears are traveling and what areas we need to protect. This information allows us to understand what lands need to be purchased and protected for conservation purposes.

But obtaining the information isn't enough. We all need to take steps to help these magnificent creatures. The conservation of wildlife corridors is critical for bears, panthers and other creatures that need to travel from region to region. Connectivity of natural areas allows wildlife to travel much more safely. More people move to Florida everyday and development is having a huge impact on our environment. We must all take the necessary steps and educate ourselves in an effort to preserve the Florida Black Bear as well as other endangered species for future generations.

Did you know that Florida Black Bears:

- are omnivores – they eat acorns, insects, berries, saw palmetto and sabal palm fruits, armadillos, honey and sweets!
- prefer fruit flavored to cinnamon and other types of sugary sweets!
- have long, sharp claws that help them climb trees and dig for food.
- females weigh about 150 – 300 lbs, while males usually weight in between 250 to 450 lbs.
- are losing genetic diversity because of inbreeding due to lack of habitat.