



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (8:42)

LOUISIANA BLACK BEAR (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH DEBBIE FULLER)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Debbie Fuller, the lead Recovery Biologist for the Louisiana Black Bear. Hi, Debbie, how are you today?

MS. FULLER: Doing just great, Sarah. Thanks.

MS. LEON: Great. Would you mind talking to us about the Louisiana Black Bear?

MS. FULLER: Really be my pleasure.

MS. LEON: Great. What can you tell us about this species?

MS. FULLER: Well, the Louisiana Black Bear is one of 13 sub-species of the American Black Bear. Historically, it occurred in East Texas, Southwest Mississippi, Louisiana and parts of Southern Arkansas. And it's an animal that primarily occurs in forested habitat.

We thought that originally the Louisiana Black Bear densities were highest in the Bottomland Harbor Forest and the lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley and that's really where the remaining numbers of bears occur today.

People who aren't familiar with bears might be interested to know bear's life cycles revolve primarily around searching for food, water, cover and mates. So, their habitat structure and distribution is very important for them.

Food is very important for bears. Everything from grocery, breeding, litter size and cub survivable is all very highly correlated with the quality of the nutrition bears get. They'll eat almost anything that's available and their diet can vary seasonally.

I'll tell you a little history about the Black Bear. At the turn of the century when bears were plentiful, Teddy Roosevelt made a very famous hunting trip and he refused to shoot a young bear on that trip. That event was widely recorded by cartoonists at that time and as a result of that to this day, stuffed toy bears are referred to as Teddy Bears.

MS. LEON: What's the current status of this species and what conservation actions are currently underway?

MS. FULLER: The Louisiana Black Bear was listed as a threatened species in 1992. It was listed primarily due to historic loss of habitat and the remaining reduced amount and fragmentation of that habitat. Also, over-hunting that contributed to the bear's decrease in numbers.

Population estimates for Louisiana Black Bear when they were listed ranged from 200 to 400 bears and we're working on getting accurate numbers on the population now but we believe it to range somewhere between 400 and 700 bears. But when the bear was listed almost 80 percent of its suitable habitat in the lower Mississippi River Valley had been lost and that was primarily due to clearing for forest and agriculture over several time periods. Once in the late 1800s, flood control activities in the early 1900s and most recently habitat and land clearing in the 1980s.

The co-habitats fragmented. You get sort of indirect effects on the population from that fragmentation because bears need for forage and move out to forage. If they have to go out into less protected habitat, meaning habitats with less cover in the form of shrubs and trees, they are more likely to be subject to mortality. For example, they may have to cross barriers such as roads and risk car mortality or just take a longer time to find the amount of food they need in order to go into dormancy in the winter.

Another big issue with the Louisiana Black Bear is fragmentation can create barriers to exchange between those populations. And that affects the population's health. In other words, even if you have bear populations in a large area of habitat, they're not going to be insured of survival unless they get some new genetic material or interchange with other populations. So, when the habitat between these populations is missing and there are no travel corridors or areas of cover that would allow bears to move between these habitats, then the population health is at risk.

So, what are we doing to try to conserve this species and recover it? Beginning in the 1990s, almost concurrent with the bear's listing, a group of agencies and private organizations decided we needed to come up with a way to address habitat restoration throughout the lower Mississippi River Valley. In other words, in a way that would help us target habitat restoration so that we could expand the base where existing breeding

populations occur and also provide habitat corridors between those populations to facilitate exchange between them.

The main groups involved in that were the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Black Bear Conservation Coalition, a private organization dedicated to the restoration of Louisiana Black Bear and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fishery.

What we ended up with was a Louisiana Black Bear habitat restoration and planning map. That map would provide areas of targeted restoration that would benefit Louisiana Black Bear. It's been a very successful program.

At the same time that those actions were going on, public agencies were also looking at ways to protect and enhance Black Bear habitat and that includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fishery, state agencies in Mississippi and other state agencies throughout Louisiana. And if you look at all those lands that have been, for example, rolled into national wildlife refuges or state wildlife management areas, over 600,000 acres of land have been restored and protected in the Louisiana Black Bear's range.

But there's another recovery action that we've undertaken starting in 2001 which is something that we have learned over time how to successful do.

Male Black Bears can be very wide-ranging as long as there is some minimal amount of habitat cover to move. But females Black Bears are very slow to expand their range. Generally, when they have young, those young will occupy some sub-part of the original female's home range. That's another factor that contributes to the isolation of these breeding populations is that the females with the young are just not moving.

We learned about a way of moving females with young that seems to be successful. We would call it our repatriation project and basically we take females that have had cubs during the winter. We remove them from their winter den with the cubs. We move them into new den sites in a new location. And when they come out of hibernation in the spring, their instinct to remain with the cubs is much stronger than their instinct to go home. And so in that way we can very slowly start to establish a new population.

As I said, we started this in 2001 and since that time we've moved 48 females and 102 cubs. It's been a very successful program.

Beginning in 2005 about four years after we started this program, we had our first natural reproduction in the wild. And since 2005 we've had over 11 what we would call natural litters. So, we're trying to close the gap between existing populations and an additional population on the landscape helps to do that.

And I couldn't talk about Black Bear recovery without talking about issues with nuisance bears and probably everybody has heard stories of bears getting into the camp sites or at garbage dumps.

Louisiana Black Bear like every other bear and they get into trouble situations if easy food exists. So, addressing the nuisance bear issues and conflict management is another very large part of the recovery program for the Louisiana Black Bear.

Because public safety is a very important aspect for all of us working on bear conservation, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the USDA Wildlife Services proactively deal with nuisance bear issues. So, we are able to in a very short time, try to address public concerns about bears that may be getting themselves into trouble. And we really believe that we will never be able to conserve bears unless we can also help the public understand that we care about your safety as well.

MS. LEON: Debbie, just piggy-backing off of that, you know, sometimes it is hard to convince people to care about the species recovery just because of all the nuisance bear issues.

MS. FULLER: Right.

MS. LEON: So, just briefly can you explain why people should care about the Louisiana Black Bear and its recovery?

MS. FULLER: Sure. In order to restore the Louisiana Black Bear, we're going to have to restore those bottomland hardwood forests that are in the lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley. That is how we can help bears. It's going to help a lot of other species we care about. One of the most obvious ones would be migratory birds, many of which also require a large block of unfragmented forested habitat.

When you reforest areas that have been previously cleared for agricultural activities and other types of land uses, you're also helping to address some of the issues associated with water pollution. So, it helps improve water quality as well.

And, finally, Louisiana Black Bear is part of the natural and cultural history of this area and I think it's important to preserve that heritage for future generations.

MS. LEON: Okay. Well, great. Thank you so much, Debbie, for your time today and it's always really great getting to highlight the progress and the successes of recovery efforts and also acknowledge our partners.

MS. FULLER: My pleasure.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.