

Executive Summary

Despite strong opposition from the public, in 2015 the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) approved a hunt of Florida's Black Bears to appease special interest groups, whose member's numbers represent only a small minority of Floridians. It was the first time in 20 years Florida Black Bears were to be hunted after they were nearly wiped out due to out-of-control hunting and poaching. The 2015 trophy hunt backfired on the FWC. The world watched as black bears were being killed at an alarming rate. The death toll rose so fast that the hunt, which was scheduled to last for seven days, was ended in just 48 hours. This gross mismanagement of Florida's wildlife shook the state of Florida and forever changed the impression and trust people had of the FWC. This case study will demonstrate the role of a persistent and organized campaign in exposing the truth behind the hunt and in getting ordinary people involved and engaged to create change. Some of the most powerful advocacy comes from passionate citizen-activists, advocating for change within their own community, to their neighbors, co-workers, family and friends but the right strategy and tactics are critical to success.

Introduction

On June 24th, 2015, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission approved a state-wide hunt from October 24-30th to kill Florida's black bears. The reasons stated for the approval were "population control" and "to reduce human/ bear confrontations". The Florida Black bear had been on the threatened species list as recent as 2012. More than 175,000 people reached out to the commission in opposition to the hunt. About 250 people indicated support of the hunt. These 250 supporters of the hunt primarily consisted of trophy hunters and weapon and gun interest groups. Many reputable organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States and The Center for Biological Diversity publicly stated their concern about the hunt and presented multiple scientific studies showing that hunting is not an effective population management tool.

Upon announcement of the bear hunt, a small group of advocates against the hunt formed a group, created a Facebook page and a website. The group organized under the name, **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt**. The groups purpose was solely to inform the public of the proposed hunt, educate people on the facts behind the hunt, and advocate for more humane methods of wildlife management. It can take as many as six gun shots at point-blank range (muzzle to fur) to kill a large adult bear. One shot, or one arrow, is very unlikely to kill a large bear quickly and humanely. Inevitably, bears will suffer in agony for some time, especially those who are never found by the hunters. Many concerned citizens and wildlife enthusiast quickly joined the group to speak out against the hunt and propose alternate solutions. Over 90% of Floridians were documented as opposing this hunt, and people from all over the world,

including many hunters and conservationists, came together to save bears and stop this proposed annual trophy hunt.

In testimony at the FWC's meeting on September 2, 2015 in Ft. Lauderdale, Dr. Thomas Eason, Director of Habitat and Species Conservation for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), explained that bear-human conflicts can be reduced by as much as 95% through trash-management practices alone. An increase in the number of encounters with bears in recent years was cited to justify the hunt. The FWC failed to consider that we have confiscated 82% of the Florida Black bear's original habitat by clearing land for commercial and residential buildings and that most of these "encounters" have been related to bears looking for food around places where people have left food, trash or pet food unsecured. The best ways to minimize human-bear interactions are to secure trash and use nonlethal methods of addressing problem bears. **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** was instrumental in spreading the word about bear proof trash cans and providing retrofitted latches for existing cans to keep bears in the woods and out of the neighborhoods.

As the date of the hunt grew closer, more people spoke out against the hunt and more evidence against the hunt accumulated. In court testimony on October 1, 2015, Dr. Eason admitted that the black bear has not exceeded the biological carrying capacity of its habitat. In other words, there were not too many bears in the woods. Dr. Eason also testified that scientific studies have shown that hunting does not reduce conflicts between bears and humans and this hunt is not expected to do so, either. If there are not too many bears in the woods, and conflicts with humans in suburbia can be almost completely solved with simple changes in human behavior, like securing trash, why did the state authorize the killing of 320 bears?

The bottom line is that the Florida Black bear hunt was driven by politics, not science. It was nothing more than a trophy hunt for special interest groups and hunting clubs. If the state were truly serious about being conservative, it would have waited until the bear population study had completed in 2016 and the results of a state-wide survey would be tabulated. Dr. Stephen Stringham, one of the country's foremost bear biologists, testified in court that the population of bears in Florida could actually be declining. Holding a hunt in 2015 invalidated the research that has already been conducted (at the expense of hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars) and nearly pushed the Florida Black Bear back into the threatened status from which it has only recently emerged.

Body

When the group **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** was formed, a website and Facebook page were set up. The Facebook page was initially set up to

inform the public of new developments of the hunt and create awareness about the Florida Black Bear. Between the time the hunt was announced and the day the Hunt began, an estimated 30,000 followers liked the page and actively participated in online discussions. Today, the Facebook page that has over 79,000 likes. In 2015, a few weeks before the hunt, Adam Sugalski the Executive director of **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** was interviewed on NPR. He spoke out publicly against the bear hunt and presented factual evidence for why the hunt should not occur. Shortly after, **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** organized a 14 City Protest, which at the time was the largest coordinated protest in Florida. That year the group received a grant from LUSH cosmetics to help pay for printing costs of the posters and flyers.

Members of the group attended FWC meetings to point out public opposition and scientific evidence against the hunt. A petition to stop the hunt was created and over 150,000 signatures were collected and delivered to the FWC. The Florida Black Bear's plight captured the attention of both National and International news forums. Adam Sugalski was interviewed by multiple news outlets for online, TV and radio publication. He co-published articles in Psychology today and the Huffington Post with Dr. Mark Bekoff. Despite the media coverage and public outcry, the FWC proceeded with the Florida Black Bear hunt.

Even though there was ample factual evidence presented against the proposed bear hunt, five of Florida's FWC commissioners voted in favor of the hunt and one voted against it (see Table 1). These commissioners who voted in favor of the hunt and who are paid with state funds, appointed to protect Florida's wildlife, and conserve the beauty of the state voted to kill one of the most beautiful and gentle animals that we share our wonderful State with. Many more humane ways of dealing with the encounters were presented such as relocation, bear proof trash cans, and even sterilization. The FWC chose to completely ignore these well thought out proposals and public opinion to appease special interest groups.

On the day the hunt began, a group from **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** along with several other organized groups went into the woods to document the hunt. These "bear monitors" were positioned at the weigh stations to keep a record of how many bears had been killed and photograph the carnage. Due to the very high volume of bears killed, the weeklong proposed hunt was called off after only 48 hours. This does not include unreported bears or cubs who died due to their mother being killed in the Hunt. Mother bears with cubs were not supposed to be taken, but it is common for mother bears to "tree" their cubs as much as 200 yards away while they forage for food. Hunters will not see the cubs, and those cubs will be orphaned, left alone to die from starvation or predation by male bears (cubs stay with their mothers for as long as two years). At the time of the year the hunt occurred – just prior to denning – many female bears were pregnant. There is no way for a hunter to know this.

The FWC had previously announced that the hunt would be an annual occurrence. **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** immediately prepared to begin the campaign to stop the hunt in 2016. The Florida Black Bear population could not withstand another hunt like this. **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** engaged in more tactics and strategies to raise public awareness and sway the decision of the FWC commissioners. Adam was granted a second interview on National Public Radio. This time he focused his comments around the mismanagement of the 2015 hunt and the proposed use of hounding for the 2016 hunt. The group organized monthly call in and email campaigns to the FWC opposing the bear hunt.

Representatives from **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** attended 3 FWC meetings to speak out against the hunt and try to convince the FWC Commissioners that the public was not in favor of another hunt. **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** staged another 28 protests in 28 different cities all at the same time in June 2016, a day before FWC commissioners were scheduled to vote on the 2016 hunt. The group provided protest consulting and ensured protesters knew their legal rights as a demonstrator and how to obtain the necessary permits. In addition, they provided guidance on how to organize a call to action and create press releases so that considerable turnout and media coverage were available. **Stop the Florida Bear Hunt** supplied 100s of activists with free leaflets to conduct their own outreach campaigns.

Media relations was a central part of the campaign to stop the hunt. Understanding how to best manage a campaign and message and preparing for interviews and press conferences is critical to staying on point and getting your message across. Adam was interviewed by NatGeo, Washington Post, UK Express, Reuters and many more local and national media outlets to generate global media coverage and opposition to the hunt. In addition, partnerships all over the state were created with different groups to focus on one common cause, the Florida Black Bear. The use of common messaging, graphic design and literature was important throughout the campaign. People associate a refined, polished image with professionalism and most importantly, credibility. Overall, over 50,000 fliers designed to get attention and promote awareness about the hunt were distributed throughout the state of Florida.

In 2016, the Florida Black Bear hunt was voted down due to overwhelming public outcry against the barbaric and unnecessary hunt and now the 2017 and 2018 have been halted as well. We believe that all the actions described above played a crucial role in stopping the Florida Black Bear hunt. A coordinated approach and uniting concerned citizens with common messaging and media tactics was the key to defeating the FWC. The trophy hunt was unscientific, immoral, and undemocratic and we let the world know through the effective use of social media, educational and media outlets.

Conclusion

Utilizing professional activism to raise public awareness is an effective tool to end the cruelest forms of animal abuse. The approach described in this study can be replicated and current efforts are underway to stop hunts in Connecticut, Virginia, and in Alaska. Organized professional activism can also be extended to other social injustices and this is the principle upon which OneProtest was founded. The organization is dedicated to supporting activists across the nation by sharing a wealth of experience in mobilizing the strong voice of the people to stand up and affect real change. Members of the group bring many years of experience in building and supporting a plethora of national and local non-profits dedicated to animal protection, hands-on undercover work, and a strong artist background to fight for those least able to fight for themselves. The group is dedicated to empowering local social justice, environmental and animal-rights activists and activist communities to carry out peaceful, lawful demonstrations that are well-organized, media-savvy and effective with well-designed, professionally produced posters, banners and other materials. To date, OneProtest has organized several very successful campaigns and actions across a variety of physical and virtual platforms covering issues such as animals in circuses, trophy hunting, dog racing and environmental causes.

Appendices

Table 1

Member	Current Term Began	Original Appointment	Term Expires
<u>Charles W. Roberts III</u> Yes to hunt	Sept. 1, 2011	Sept. 1, 2011	Aug. 1, 2016
<u>Ronald M. Bergeron</u> No to hunt	March 8, 2013	Aug. 6, 2007	Aug. 1, 2017
<u>Adrien Bo Rivard</u> Yes to hunt	March 8, 2013	March 8, 2013	Aug. 1, 2017
<u>Richard A. Corbett</u> Yes to hunt	March 8, 2013	February 2003	Jan. 6, 2018

Brian S. Yablonski Yes to hunt	April 4, 2014	January 2004	Jan. 5, 2019
Richard Hanas Yes to hunt	June 23, 2014	June 23, 2014	Aug. 1, 2017
Liesa Priddy Yes to hunt	Jan. 6, 2012	Jan. 6, 2012	Jan. 6, 2017

Everyone except Ronald M. Bergeron voted in favor of the hunt.

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