

Bears without boundaries: Social media complicates living with bears today



Your Turn
Frances Figart
Guest columnist

In Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as many communities in its vicinity, our tourism-based economy is built around the wild nature of our public lands, aptly represented by the iconic image of the black bear.

Bears have excellent long-term memory and a highly evolved ability to make connections and draw associations. When they lose their fear of people and get too close for comfort, they are usually looking for food. But this is not their wild nature. It's a behavior they have learned—from humans.

As a ranger in the Smokies during the 1960s, when the park had maybe 350 bears, Bud Cantrell saw this behavior firsthand.

"It was just something regular back then for people to feed the bears, and you'd wind up with big bear (traffic) jams," he recalls. "We carried a big stick with us, and the bears were sort of trained. If you hit the pavement with a stick, they'd take off. When we had a bad bear, I'd bait it, get the bear and carry it up to the head of Little River and turn him loose. Soon, they usually were back."

By the end of the '60s, the park had instituted a program that prevented visitors from feeding bears. Today, the Smokies bear population has grown to approximately 1,600, many of which travel out of the park and into gateway communities to access human food. Farther from the park boundary, Asheville's and Knoxville's bears are also thriving amid increasing human populations and development.

Today's human-bear conflict zone is further complicated by our ability to instantly share information digitally to huge numbers of people with the click of a few buttons on our smart phones or laptop keyboards. Some social media users and sites make it a practice to post images and videos of bears getting into trouble in neighborhoods—like jumping into a dumpster, opening a car door or getting into someone's refrigerator. These posts are usually framed to elicit laughter and humor.

"While it is always exciting to see wildlife and can appear comical to see black bears getting into cars or trash, we have to remember that these smart and long-lived animals are learning and often teaching their young habits that will put their lives and people's property at risk," says Jeff Hunter, senior program manager with National Parks Conservation Association.

NPCA is one of several organizations supporting the Smoky Mountain Bear-Wise Community Taskforce, a group on a mission to encourage positive behaviors that will minimize the potential for human-bear conflicts in the Smokies and its gateway communities. Another is Great Smoky Mountains Association, headed up by CEO Laurel Rematore who traded black bears in Yosemite for those in the Smokies to take her job in 2016.

"While at first blush those social media posts may be entertaining, the fact that the bear got access to human food is practically signing a death sentence for that bear," she says. "And who can blame them? I know once I've had a



Bears have excellent long-term memory and a highly evolved ability to make connections and draw associations. JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

taste of French fries or potato chips, I want more too."

There are plenty of natural food sources around our region to sustain healthy black bear populations. But when we tempt bears by making human food available, and then post evidence of their bad behavior, we glamorize and promote some of the most undesirable behaviors of black bears.

"These behaviors are irreversible and often continue to escalate," says Bill Stiver, supervisory wildlife biologist with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "Often, wildlife managers have no choice but to euthanize bears that pose a threat to people and their property."

What can be done? It's time to get back to these BearWise Basics:

- Never feed or approach bears
- Secure food, garbage and recycling

■ Remove bird feeders when bears are active

■ Never leave pet food outdoors

■ Clean and store grills

■ Alert neighbors to bear activity

"A wild bear is a magnificent sight to see," says Rematore. "We can ensure that the videos people share are of wild bears, not those at needless risk, if we humans will only behave responsibly."

To keep bears wild, maintain 50 yards' distance and do not leave your food accessible to them. When one person in the neighborhood feeds bears or allows food to allure them, that causes issues for everyone else in the area—and ultimately threatens the bears' very existence.

"These bears are leaving protected lands, filled with natural food sources, to score easy pickings with unsecured trash," says Hunter. "Sustainable co-existence with black bears means that they can't access our trash as a food source. Once we correct that issue, things get better fast."

Resources for learning more

■ Get all the BearWise Basics at bearwise.org.

■ "Living with Bears Handbook" (Expanded 2nd edition, 2016) by Linda Masterson.

■ Become a BearWise certified community: ncwildlife.org/bearwise.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

To help economic recovery, cities and towns need help



Your Turn
Bob Scott
Guest columnist

As towns like Franklin look to the future, we know that we have some tough days ahead.

The COVID 19 crisis has been devastating to small businesses in my town, across the region and across the state. Even as large corporate entities, including big box retailers, have received help from Washington, I worry about how our locally-owned small retailers and other businesses have been able to access federal relief and how they will survive.

Small businesses are the lifeblood of cities and towns across the state. Municipalities and their residents depend on these businesses, and the business-

es in turn depend on the services of cities and towns.

What I also know is that, to date, the vast majority of cities and towns in North Carolina have received little help from the state or federal government to address our own financial troubles.

As retail activity has fallen, so have sales taxes that cities and towns depend on to fund crucial services like police and fire protection, street maintenance and sanitation. Water and sewer systems are seeing much higher rates of non-payment as residents who have been laid off or furloughed struggle to pay bills. With hotels experiencing 70 and 80 vacancy rates, occupancy taxes used to promote tourism have seen dramatic declines.

In Franklin, we are expecting a 30 percent decline in revenues, and as a result, will be forced to focus on essential services. Meanwhile, we know that oth-

er cities and towns are discussing layoffs.

But for North Carolinians across the state, that is not the only reason to worry.

Local governments and their financial health are crucial to economic recovery, and it is not just because we act as major employers.

Cities and towns are builders of infrastructure. Private construction contractors and their employees depend on these investments. Home builders and commercial builders require added water and sewer capacity to push forward with their investments. Retailers need these investments to make their businesses accessible and attractive to customers.

As Congress considers a new round of COVID-19 relief that would address the revenue shortfalls facing state and local governments, it is crucial that our

congressional representatives, and particularly US Sens. Thom Tillis and Richard Burr, understand this connection. Local governments need revenue replacement funding from Congress so that we can keep moving forward with critical investments. We also need the US House and Senate to agree to loosen restrictions on the previous round of funding so that we can access those dollars to address budget shortfalls.

Finally, cities and towns need the North Carolina General Assembly, which has reserved \$150 million of that previous of federal relief, to treat cities and towns equitably and direct that money to them as they previously directed \$150 million to counties.

For North Carolina as a whole, and for communities across western North Carolina, challenging days lie ahead. But we can emerge from this time in a better place if cities and towns can be put in the best position possible to serve in their traditional role – as a provider of practical, everyday services and as a partner with our businesses in driving the economy forward.

Bob Scott is the Mayor of the Town of Franklin and past chair of the NC Mayors Association.

Churches can't reopen in NC because we never closed

Your Turn
Steve Runholt
Guest columnist

Last week, I found myself in complete agreement with the president. This surprised me.

"Churches are essential," he declared, just as the Memorial Day weekend was about to kick off.

"Yes they are!" I cheered. "Now more than ever!"

His early suggestion that the coronavirus would magically disappear had made me skeptical of his handling of the crisis, and I had remained so. Could this be about to change, I wondered.

Sadly, this moment of shared agreement turned out to be fleeting. The president went on to say that because churches are essential, he planned to order them to reopen.

But churches can't reopen, I thought to myself, because they never closed.

It is true that virulent outbreaks of COVID-19, many of them with fatal consequences, have been specifically traced to congregational gatherings in Georgia, Tennessee, New York, Texas, Arkansas, California, Louisiana and elsewhere.

In light of this news, faith leaders from all points on the religious spectrum have had no choice but to suspend in-person worship and prayer services,

along with other vital ministries.

But that is not to say that our churches have closed. We have simply had to find new ways to be church, and do church, other than ones centered around in-person contact.

At Warren Wilson Presbyterian, we quickly joined with churches all across the country in transitioning to an online worship service. This was a whole new modality for us, and our initial efforts were unpolished. With my director of music, we led our distant congregation through our hymns and unison prayers using cue cards.

But we learned quickly.

Thanks to the wonders of iMovie, we now display the lyrics to our hymns on the viewer's screen, and the words to our unison prayers scroll out in real time. Our members serve as liturgists, recording their parts on their smart phones in the safety of their homes or gardens, and emailing those in to be woven seamlessly into the service.

We have also shared in a transatlantic worship experience, offering a joint service with our sister congregation in the Cathedral in Dunkeld, Scotland.

But it's not just worship that has changed for us.

There are no scientific grounds for believing that the inherent danger of congregational gatherings is suddenly less acute than it was three months ago.

To mitigate this risk, we have had to reimagine all the ministries we provide.

We now offer fellowship events and Sunday school classes for our adults and children via Zoom.

On the community outreach side, our members continue to find safe and innovative ways to provide and even expand our regular ministries to our most vulnerable neighbors.

Every Thursday a group of dedicated volunteers prepares and drops off lunch for up to fifty residents of the emergency shelter run by AHOPE in the Red Roof Inn in West Asheville.

Wearing masks, and careful to observe strict social distancing protocols, other members have lately resumed serving lunch at the Veterans Restoration Quarters on Tunnel Road.

These are just a few examples of the new ways we have found to offer our services and support our ministry partners.

Fortunately, for us, and for dozens of churches in this area and thousands more across the country, the choice of whether or not to comply with the president's directive was not difficult.

In this decision, as in all other decisions, we answer to a higher authority. And we opted to stay open weeks ago, long before the president's declaration.

Still, I understand the longing to return to in-person worship. I desperately

miss seeing my members gathering in the pews. I miss singing and praying with them during the service, and connecting them afterward, during fellowship hour.

But my charge as their pastor is to protect the health and safety of my flock. And so we plan to continue to ask our members to stay home and stay safe on Sunday mornings, until qualified public health experts declare that it is safe to return to church.

If you are a church-goer, I sincerely hope that you will continue to prioritize your own health and safety, and that you will resist the urge to return to in-person worship.

If your church does not offer an online service, and if you're able to do so, I would encourage you to search the web until you find one that does.

I hope the service you find speaks to your heart and feeds your soul. And when you press "play," I hope you will sing and pray with all your might.

Steve Runholt is the pastor of the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church. A former Rhodes scholar, he earned his M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a D.Min. from Duke Divinity School. He lives in Montford with his wife and their two rescue dogs, Huck and Lucy.