

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF A BEAR'S LIFE?

By

Don Molde

It is a tradition in this country to disregard the economic (dollar) value of game species or predators lost to the public's wildlife trust when those animals are killed by sportsmen or government agencies, such as the Nevada Department of Wildlife or APHIS/Wildlife Services (U.S. government predator control program). Poachers or persons killing such animals in an illegal manner can be fined and/or imprisoned, suggesting...if you think about it...that such animals DO INDEED have economic value to us.

When a black bear is legally killed by a hunter, an employee of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, or by Wildlife Services, the public, nonetheless, loses a valuable asset. Beyond any symbolic or iconic virtues we may ascribe to it, the bear's life...it's very breath...represents a dollar loss to the general public when it is taken for trophy purposes (bear rug), or for convenience ("nuisance").

We can attach a dollar value to a bear's life in different ways. For example, we could look to see what a sportsman is willing to pay a guide to hunt and kill the animal and use that dollar figure as a basis for calculating value using the economic assumption that a reasonable person would not be paying more for a product (i.e. the dead bear) than the product is "worth". One might also see what bear mounts (stuffed bears) sell for as a measure of value, or perhaps add up the monies gained by selling bear parts...e.g. gall bladder, paws, pelt..as a measure of its worth.

Another way to value a bear's life, and the one I prefer to use for now, is to look at what our legal system has to say about the illegal killing of bears and the penalties attached to such action. In Nevada, a person illegally killing a black bear could end up with either civil or criminal penalties, depending on the facts of the case, and the discretion of the legal system. First, let's take a look at the civil side of it.

In Nevada, a person who illegally kills a black bear and who ends up on the civil side of the law, can be fined from \$5000 - \$30,000 for the offense, depending on judicial discretion. Keep in mind that civil penalties tend to be reimbursement-oriented in our society, as compared to punishment-oriented which characterizes the criminal side of the law.

On the criminal side, a person convicted of a Category E felony, which is the applicable category for someone convicted of illegally killing a trophy/big game species, can face imprisonment (1-4 years) and a fine of up to \$5000. (One might suppose that the lesser penalty here compared to the civil side is related to the possibility of incarceration.)

So, considering these two legal consequences together, it is easily argued that a conservative estimate of the value of the life of a black bear in Nevada is \$5000 since this number is common to both categories of offense.

Others have suggested that special characteristics of an animal...e.g. the iconic value of the bear in Native American culture can augment the base value. I'm sure many would suggest (including me) that

the iconic feature alone should (at least) double the base value...e.g. increase to \$10,000. For now, though, I won't expand this possibility beyond what I've already written.

The reason it is important to determine economic value lost to the public as a result of killing these animals is because sportsmen, fish and game agencies, and Wildlife Services like to advertise or promote the economic BENEFITS of killing the animal. They tout the money brought into a community by hunters, the benefits to motel owners, restaurant owners, gas stations and the like. Wildlife Services likes to show the livestock industry how much money it "saves" the industry by killing predators.

Never, though, is the public shown a "loss" statement as to what has been subtracted from its wildlife trust when these animals were killed. Never is the dollar value of dead bears (or for that matter, any of other big game/trophy species) SUBTRACTED from the claimed economic benefits to the community which would allow for a truer accounting of the costs and benefits. Only the claimed benefit side is ever shown. The economic value of animal's lives...even though easily calculated....is never acknowledged and simply disregarded.

How does this make sense?