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Article published Saturday, June 17, 2006

Wildlife group defends decision to kill bear unrelated to mauling

By **JIM SIELICKI**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency yesterday defended its decision to immediately kill a black bear it captured three days after a fatal mauling of a girl from Clyde, Ohio, even before tests determined that the agency had the wrong animal.

Animal-rights advocates are calling the killing of the bear a tragedy and have said that there were other options available to wildlife authorities.

A second black bear, captured four days after the April 13 attack, was kept alive through the two-month investigation before it was determined to be the bear that attacked the Ohio family, killing the young girl. The bear has since been destroyed.

Both bears were males and weighed about 210 pounds.

Elora Petrasek, 6, of Clyde was killed. Her mother, Susan Cenkus, 45, and her son, Luke Cenkus, 2, were mauled by a bear but survived.


The family was camping in the Cherokee National Forest near the Chilhowee Recreation

Area east of Benton, Tenn., when they were attacked.



The black bear first euthanized by Tennessee wildlife officials was later proven not to be the one responsible for a fatal attack on a Clyde, Ohio, family.

(TENNESSEE WILDLIFE RESOURCES AGENCY)

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The family was leaving a waterfall pool near Benton Falls on a rugged area 10 miles from the nearest highway and heading down a trail from the Chilhowee Recreation Area when the bear attacked.

Officials said the bear first bit Luke Cenkus on his head and punctured his skull. Ms. Cenkus tried to fend off the bear with rocks and sticks but it attacked her, dragging her off the trail.

The girl apparently ran away and almost an hour passed before a rescuer found her body 100 yards off the trail with a bear. The rescuer, Danny Stinnett, said he shot twice at the bear with a pistol before it ran away.

The Tennessee wildlife agency coordinated a search for the bear with dogs. Live culvert traps - a large pipe with a door to trap the animal - as well as snares, were set up in the area, one close to the attack site and several others in the area.

The first bear was captured near the site of the attack, euthanized, and sent to Tennessee Veterinary Teaching Clinic in Knoxville, where a necropsy was performed. The agency said results of the procedure did not produce evidence that it was the bear involved in the attack and a further analysis was ordered.

Ron Fox, assistant director of Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, said yesterday that searchers based their conclusion on the first captured bear's proximity to the attack site and that his paws closely matched tracks found at the site.

"In everyone's mind, it was probably the bear that did it and had returned to the scene," Mr. Fox said.

Tracking dogs had led searchers from the attack scene to nearly the point where the first bear was caught in a live trap. "We were 95 percent sure the first bear would turn out to be the attacker," he said.

The second bear was trapped a day later and kept in quarantine until about a week ago, when DNA scraped from under the bear's claws matched the victims' DNA. Tests were performed by the FBI, Mr. Fox said.

"We were lucky to have held on to that animal and collected that material," he said.

Because of the lapse of time between the attack and the first bear's capture, wildlife agents wanted to immediately euthanize the animal and examine its stomach contents for human tissue and fabric before they passed through its digestive system.

Brain tissue was examined to determine whether it had rabies, Mr. Fox said.

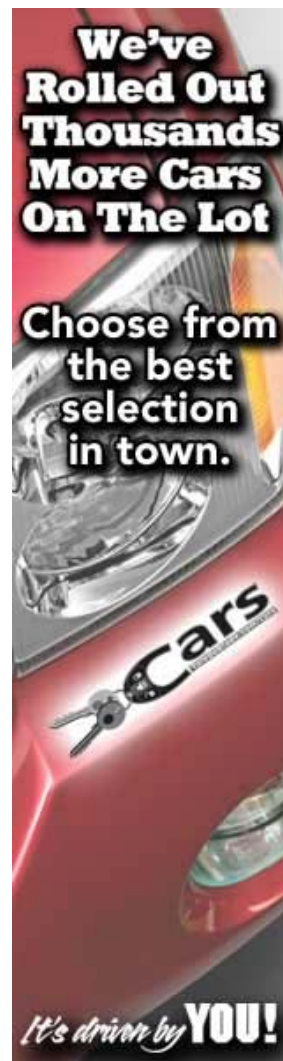
"There are certain things you have to do to get immediate evidence," he said.

The agency is drawing criticism from animal-rights groups over what turned out to be an unnecessary euthanasia. But Mr. Fox said the decision, based on the information available at the time, was the correct one. Keeping the bear alive, he said, "was not an option. We needed to resolve that issue."

Stephanie Boyles, a wildlife biologist for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, questioned whether taking the life of an "innocent bear" was necessary. She said the park made a "rash decision" to kill the bear before learning it had the right animal.

"Once you determine you don't have the animal responsible, the correct thing to do is return the animal to the mountains," she said from PETA's headquarters in Norfolk, Va.

Ms. Boyles said the first animal should have been tranquilized, examinations



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"That is what everybody is really upset about," she said. "They have ways of checking to see if [the bear] was responsible for the tragedy."

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When the second bear was trapped, park authorities believed that the time frame was outside the period where useful evidence would be found, Mr. Fox said.

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Ms. Boyles said bears and other animals that become a nuisance by entering tents and cabins or stealing from picnics need "negative reinforcement of some kind" to discourage them, she said.

"If it attacks humans, and it is identified, it really is probably in the best interests of everyone to euthanize the animal," Ms. Boyles said.

The state wildlife policy is to destroy wild bears proven to be involved in the attack of a human.

Experts in bear behavior say the best way to avoid predatory behavior is educating the public to not feed bears and other wildlife.

Mr. Fox said bears that become problems around campsites or rural homes are captured, tagged, and removed to a remote mountain area 40 miles away in order to keep them away from garbage or food sources that lured them in the first place. Rangers estimate that there are 1,500 bears in the park.

The Appalachian Bear Center, a nonprofit group that returns black bears to the wild, said organizations that work with wild animals must be careful to avoid unnecessary human contact that could lead to later nuisance behavior.

"We don't want to add to the problem," said Lisa Stewart, the facility's curator. "We want them to stay wild."

The black bear rehabilitation facility, founded in 1996 in the Great Smoky National Park, primarily handles bears that are orphaned, injured, or in need of medical care. The center also tries to educate the public about the bears and threats to them.

Jack Burgin, president, would not comment on specifics of the Cherokee National Forest incident, but he praised the park rangers for the care they take when dealing with black bears.

"I know they are excellent, kind, and caring people over there and want to the right thing," he said.

The goal of the Appalachian Bear Center is to rehabilitate the bears as quickly as possible, with a minimum of human contact.

The volunteer organization has cared for 71 bears since its inception.

Black bear attacks are rare, impossible to predict, and difficult to prevent, according to research published by Stephen Herrero of the University of Calgary.

After the April attack, the park service provided details of the event to Mr. Herrero, who said the attack was "predatory in nature." He cited the persistence of the attack, lack of food items carried by the victims, the daylight attack, and involvement of a young male bear wandering in "less than optimal pine habitat" as the basis of his judgment.

Mr. Herrero says there are approximately 1 million black bears in North America, and only one or two such human fatalities a year.

The state allows hunting and issues permits for landowners to kill "nuisance" bears, which results in the deaths of 300 bears each hunting season.

Luke Cenkus was released from T.C. Thompson Children's Hospital in Chattanooga, Tenn., on April 21, and Ms. Cenkus was released from Erlanger Hospital, also in Chattanooga, on May 6 and has returned to Ohio. The funeral for Elora was conducted May 6 in Clyde.

The area of the park where the attack occurred was closed for two months after the attack and was reopened to the public yesterday.

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