



Bear Cub Petting Zoos: Bad for People, Bad for Bears

Contents:

1. The Problem with Bear Cub Petting Zoos
2. Bear Cub Petting Still Exists in Michigan
3. Associated Problems
4. Ending Bear Cub Petting in Michigan

1. The Problem with Bear Cub Petting Zoos

Allowing close human contact with immature black bears at roadside zoos endangers the safety and well-being of both bears and humans. Roadside zoos use bear cub petting as a money-making venture, attracting visitors who pay a fee to handle and pose with immature bears. Risks include injury to bears and humans, exposure to disease, habituation of bears to human contact, and the implication that wild bears can be safely approached.

2. Bear Cub Petting Still Exists in Michigan

The majestic solitary American Black Bear is native to Michigan. Historically, human interest in these shy creatures was exploited by business owners in rural Michigan who lured them with bait piles and/or exhibited orphaned and captured bears either for direct profit, or to promote an associated business such as a gas station or restaurant. Roadside zoos offered tourists the opportunity to pet bear cubs and pose with them for photographs for a fee. Many of the animals lived in sub-standard enclosures, with inadequate diets and care. Some were even forced to live on chains or tethers.

The private ownership of large carnivores, including American Black Bears, was prohibited in Michigan (with certain exceptions) in 2000 by the Large Carnivore Act (PA 274). Exhibiting bears by a business is allowed under the law only if the primary purpose is educational or exhibitory, and the business is not using bears to attract customers to an associated business. Direct human contact with bears, including cubs, by business patrons is prohibited.

Only a few bear petting establishments remain active in the state in 2012. A for-profit roadside zoo in the Upper Peninsula was recently directed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment (MDNRE) to discontinue allowing human contact with bear cubs. In January 2013, Sen. Tom Casperson and Sen. Howard Walker introduced SB 48, which would allow for-profit businesses to offer human contact with bear cubs up to 8 ¼ months (36 weeks) of age weighing up to 90 lbs.



Black bear cubs are strong and quick, and can easily weigh 60 to 75 lbs. or more by the age of 8 months.



American Black Bear distribution map

“...bears are...large and powerful animals that have been known to injure and even kill humans if they feel threatened.”

Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment website

3. Associated Problems

Human Safety

Black bear cubs weigh about 20 lbs. at 4 months of age. By 8 months of age they normally weigh 50 to 75 lbs. or more. Black bears are nervous and easily frightened. Most injuries from black bears occur when people try to feed, pet, or crowd them. Bears have non-retractable claws, can climb trees at age 6 weeks, and can outrun humans. Cubs have been known to turn over flat-shaped rocks weighing more than 300 lbs. with a single foreleg.

Petting zoos have the potential to spread dangerous diseases. In 1999, a sick 6 month old bear cub in an Iowa petting zoo caused more than 150 people in multiple states to get Rabies post-exposure shots. In 2000, a cub in a Pennsylvania petting zoo caused an outbreak of E. coli that resulted in 55 cases of the disease (mostly children), 16 hospitalizations, and one kidney transplant.

Habituating Bears to Humans, and Humans to Bears

Conflicts between humans and wild bears arise when bears, normally shy and solitary, are habituated to humans. This can occur through feeding bears, either intentionally (baiting) or non-intentionally (leaving garbage and food accessible). Supplemental feeding is not advised by the MDNRE because of the potential for habituating bears and making them more likely to become involved with negative bear-human interactions.

Encouraging children and adults to pet and/or feed bears in roadside zoos may also habituate humans to bears. Many Michiganders already live or are moving into black bear habitat areas. Successful coexistence with bears comes with human responsibility, so that bears maintain their natural aversion to human contact and close association. Permitting people to come into contact with bears can lessen human caution, encourage bear feeding and discourage the use of safety measures recommended for living in bear country.

4. Ending Bear Cub Petting in Michigan

Michigan law already prohibits contact between humans and captive bears. Our law protects humans and bears. We should not weaken the law to allow for-profit roadside zoos to promote petting of bear cubs. Businesses that are found to have violated this law should be held accountable for their actions. Join Michigan Humane Society in opposing legislation that would weaken our state's Large Carnivore Law.



“The majority of attacks on humans... (are by) bears habituated to human contact and food.”

Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance,
Stephen Herrero,
May 1, 2002



Bears held captive by animal trainers, in zoos, carnivals, or kept as pets have been responsible for several attacks. Black bears can live up to 30 years in captivity. Bear cubs raised in petting zoos are habituated to humans and cannot be released back to the wild.