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The State

Caged Bear Spurs Cries of Outrage

Animals: Sierra community wants him back in the wild, but state officials say he could be dangerous.

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RANCHO CORDOVA, Calif. — Arthur the bear is behind bars, far from his stomping grounds in the eastern Sierra. And the people of Mammoth Lakes want him back.

But if state wildlife managers have their way, the 309-pound bruin won't ever return to the wild.

Little more than a month ago, Arthur was living anonymously in a drainage culvert along a Mammoth golf course, one of about 30 bears that call the mountain resort home.

Today he is caged at a government wildlife center in this Sacramento suburb 15 miles east of the state Capitol, recovering from a gunshot wound and dubbed a nuisance bear by the California Department of Fish and Game.

That conclusion has caused an uproar in California's eastern outback, turning Arthur into a cause celebre--the object of a philosophic tug-of-war between animal rights activists who want him liberated and state scientists who aim to put him in a zoo.

There have been "Free Arthur" rallies, petition drives, and angry calls to state lawmakers and the office of Gov. Gray Davis. There have also been a criminal investigation and plenty of finger pointing.

"We want Arthur back in the eastern Sierra," said Tina Gasperik, a Mammoth Lakes resident outraged by the case. "We're going to fight for him to return."

It all began in mid-October, when a neighbor called police to report that a hulking black bear appeared to have been injured. Arthur was walking on three legs, his right hindquarter dragging behind.

As always in Mammoth, a town nestled around the base of the world-class ski mountain that undergirds the local economy, word of the injured bear brought out Steve Searles.

Searles is the bear man of Mammoth. For the last five years, he has worked with city police to control the bears that find their way out of the pines and prowl the streets in search of something to eat.

A practitioner in the art of "adverse conditioning," Searles knows every bear in town by sight and professes to control them with the sound of his booming voice and a battery of flash grenades and other pyrotechnics. That forceful persuasion, Searles maintains, has made Mammoth's bears fear the very sight of humans.

"We decided we couldn't control the 2 million visitors who come here each year, so we decided to control the bears," Searles explained. "And our bears are perfectly behaved. They won't take handouts. They won't eat in front of humans. They're afraid of people."

A Botched Shot of Tranquilizer

Arthur was in obvious distress when Searles approached with a Mammoth police officer. Searles said the bear had a patch of wet fur about the size of a Frisbee radiating from what appeared to be a bullet wound.

They attempted to tranquilize him, firing a drug-filled dart into Arthur's rear. But the dose was too little, and the bear scampered into one of the 3-foot-wide drainage pipes that lace the golf course.

A call to Fish and Game wardens didn't bring any aid. State wildlife experts refused to help the bear, saying nature should be allowed to take its course.

"Our typical reaction is to let's first see if an injured wild animal can make it on its own," said Patrick Foy, a Fish and Game Department spokesman. "This isn't an unusual situation. We're typically at odds with the animal rights community as to when wildlife needs help and when it should be left to its own devices."

Fish and Game officials also have long been at odds with Searles, whose methods and hands-on philosophy run counter to the tack of the department's bear experts.

Miffed by the latest episode, the department's law enforcement arm launched an investigation of Searles and the Mammoth police officer who attempted to tranquilize the bear, a task that only state-sanctioned experts are supposed to take on.

But ire over Arthur's treatment was growing in Mammoth. The community's local TV news program and radio station began airing reports on Arthur's condition, running footage of the limping bear. The local paper wrote stories. Public outrage began to grow.

The building uproar drew in national animal rights groups ranging from the Humane Society of the United States to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The office of state Sen. Rico Oller (R-San Andreas) was besieged with phone calls and e-mails.

Anger flashed on Nov. 9. A group from Lake Tahoe, the Bear League, had helped to arrange for a veterinarian to fly in to treat Arthur. But state game officials, after a tense two-hour meeting with Searles and Mammoth police and city officials, refused to allow the bear to be touched.

Public Pressure Prompts Reversal

Instead, wardens had Searles prod the animal out of its hiding place. The bear limped out. State officials said they could not discern any obvious gunshot wound and decreed that the bear should remain untouched.

Searles, a tall, plain-spoken man, was aghast. As he saw it, Arthur had been in obvious pain for nearly a month and deserved help: "We had to turn our back once again on that suffering bear."

As the public pressure continued to mount, Fish and Game officials finally relented. On Nov. 14, a state wildlife veterinarian hit the bear with a tranquilizer dart, loaded him in a steel cage on a truck, and carted the snoozing animal to Fish and Game's Wildlife Investigation Laboratory in Rancho Cordova.

State experts examined Arthur and were unconvinced he had been wounded. For several days, the bear skulked in his cage, until X-rays were taken Tuesday at UC Davis. They showed three small metal pellets in his right hindquarters.

Arthur had been hit during California's bear-hunting season, when 1,500 of the big omnivores can be bagged up and down the state. But the wound seemed too small to be the product of a hunter, authorities said. The bear, who can now put some weight on the leg, is being given antibiotics and painkillers.

But his prospects for roaming free look bleak. During his stay in captivity, Arthur's keepers discovered his diet had included lots of garbage. Among the items found in his scat were paper food packages, shredded plastic cartons, even a discarded tube sock.

Considering this newfound evidence that he had been dipping into the garbage pail, Fish and Game officials decided that Arthur presents a potential threat to mankind. He is a "nuisance bear." And such animals, department experts believe, cannot be rehabilitated to kick the habit of human food.

Foy puts it bluntly, saying that "a bear that has become dependent on people for food is not going to be released into the wild." And the reason is simple: "Their behavior never changes. Ultimately, there will be conflicts with people."

People Encroaching on Bear Habitat

Attacks by black bears, normally relatively docile animals, are on the rise as development encroaches ever more on the California wild lands. Last July, a woman taking a midday break at a La Verne tree farm got mauled on the arm by a young black bear.

Foy said he'd rather not risk trouble. "I'll take criticism," he said. "I'd rather have that than have him go back out there and hurt or kill someone."

With Arthur probably headed to a zoo or wildlife sanctuary, the rallying cry in Mammoth has switched from "treat Arthur" to "free Arthur."

A peaceful demonstration a week ago in a Vons supermarket parking lot drew more than 100 placard-carrying animal lovers, who then paraded up a main street. A local Native American tribe performed an ancestral dance. Gasperik collected support on her petition, bursting now with 1,075 signatures of Mammoth denizens. And Searles, whom the local district attorney refused to prosecute for his early efforts to aid the bear, gave an impassioned speech.

Searles said most bears living near civilization occasionally feast on garbage. That, he said, is a people problem. And though Mammoth has pushed to get garbage cans universally bear-proofed, there remain a few humans who don't follow the rules.

"It would be sickening for him to spend his life behind bars, even though he has committed no crime," Searles said of Arthur. "I'd rather see him dead than in a zoo."