

Fur flies over bear / State retires limping bear to life of luxury

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Arthur, once your average garbage-loving bear, now a cause celebre.

Today we bring you the saga of Arthur the Handicapped Bear, a furry friend who managed to get snagged in the biggest trap of all -- bureaucratic good intentions. Now Arthur is no ordinary California black bear. He's a garbage can-raiding scavenger who had been living quietly in a culvert next to a golf course at Mammoth Lakes.

But then Arthur developed a limp and suddenly he wasn't just a bear, but a bear with a "disability" -- a designation that triggered a four-month tug-of-war among local Indians, animal rights activists, the district attorney and a pack of state bureaucrats. All of which doomed gimp Arthur to weeks of solitary confinement at a government compound near Sacramento.

"This whole thing has gotten out of paw," declared one state **Department of Fish and Game** type who has been caught up in the maelstrom.

Arthur's trip down the road of good intentions started back in October when a couple of locals in the Eastern Sierra resort town noticed that the 550- pound bear seemed to be favoring his right hind leg over his left.

Thinking Arthur had been the victim of a hunter's bullets, the locals called Fish and Game, hoping the bear could be rounded up and treated. Fish and Game said no. After all, the limping bear was still eating, still getting around on three legs and, as game wardens observed, still able to climb his favorite 60-foot tree. Besides, explained Fish and Game spokesman **Steve Martarano**, the state doesn't have a rehab center for disabled bears, and with some 20,000 bears to worry about in California, it's not about to open one for Arthur.

Not happy with the kiss-off, the townspeople turned up the heat, and soon the Tahoe-based **Bear League** (yes, there actually is one) and the **Humane Society** were asking the Mono County district attorney to bring animal cruelty charges against Fish and Game for neglecting poor Arthur. Fish and Game brass took one look down the barrel of this PR nightmare and caved.

They tracked down Arthur, tranquilized him and shipped him up to a wildlife lab near Sacramento, where he underwent X-rays and a full battery of medical tests from a team of **University** of California at Davis vets.

The diagnosis: "Arthur suffers from osteoarthritis in both hips . . . and in all likelihood (will) be disabled to some extent permanently," wrote Mono County District Attorney **George Booth** after conferring with doctors. To be sure, Arthur had a couple of old buckshot wounds as well, but the experts concluded they weren't the problem. Now the state was stuck with a diagnosed "disabled" bear and the big question of what to do.

As luck would have it, the **Performing Animal Welfare Society** (PAWS) -- the folks who run a **Club Med** of sorts for retired show biz animals in the Central Valley town of Galt -- offered to give Arthur a permanent new home, complete with his own 1,000-square-foot den and all the honeysuckle he could chew.

But no sooner did Arthur get his ticket to paradise than representatives of local Indian tribes showed up at the state **Resources Agency** headquarters in Sacramento declaring Arthur a "sacred animal" and demanding his release.

This time Fish and Game held the line, saying Arthur's stay had rendered him useless in the wild. Or as Fish and Game's Martarano put it: "A fed bear is a dead bear."

The "free Arthur" fury, however, did have an upshot: The state attorney general's office has promised to sit down with tribes throughout the state to draw up new guidelines for the handling of bears.

And as for Arthur -- well, this past week, after all the back and forth, he arrived at his new home, the ranch for retired show biz animals northeast of Stockton.

There to greet him was a horde of circus bears, tigers and elephants. Now Arthur is in his very own, newly built \$20,000 compound -- complete with a jet-spraying hot tub to ease his aching joints.

"I'm not sure if the spa comes with plastic martini glasses," Martarano said.

No, but it sure sounds, er . . . bearable.