

# What exactly is a "habituated" bear?

## How is it different from a "food conditioned" bear?

A brief explanation by John Neary, US Forest Service, Admiralty National Monument

For years I have been hearing about all the problems that "habituated" bears cause. This confuses me because I regularly work around habituated bears and they rarely cause my coworkers any problems at all. In fact, they are fairly predictable in their actions and are much safer for untrained visitors to be around. Why then does a myth persist that habituated bears cause problems that "wild" bears do not?

It stems, I think, from a misunderstanding of the word "habituated". People in general don't understand that habituation is not the formation of bad habits like dumping garbage cans at night. That's something entirely different. But since the word contains the root "habit" many people assume this to be the case.

The real meaning of habituated is simply the loss of a certain response to a stimulus. In this case the stimulus is the presence of people, and the bear response is normally to flee. Bears are wary around humans, an uneasy relationship that has developed over the eons largely due to competition between two species for food and space. This uneasiness normally results in bears who run from people, or who come out only at night so as to avoid confrontation.

But habituated bears don't run from people and they feel relatively comfortable around people. Why? There are many reasons but usually it's because people have placed themselves in the middle of a traditional bear feeding area or travel zone and some of the bears have been forced to come into regular contact with the people. Through this regular contact the bear learns tolerance. The bear learns to take more risk so it can continue using the food resource the people would otherwise block it from obtaining.

You could think of it in reverse this way; a bear comes into your back yard each day and sits for no apparent reason. It just looks around and does nothing. In response you have the choice of trying to:

1. scare the bear off,
2. kill it,
3. sell your home and leave, or
4. adapt to it by learning how to avoid conflict with it

Most people opt for the first or second choice (and some bears also try these approaches on people). But other bears try to adapt. Through a series of choices they decide the risk of people nearby is acceptable because the people aren't being threatening. The result can be as dramatic as the McNeil River Bear Viewing Area near Homer Alaska where 40 or more grizzly bears can be seen out in the open by a small group of well controlled bear watchers and where the bears don't run, don't hide, come out in the day, and sometimes try to sniff the shoelaces of the watchers. Is this good or bad? Depends on your perspective.

In Juneau, Alaska (where I live) there are many black bears that pass through town on their way to the food resources they are seeking. They have done this for many centuries in order to get to the lowland meadows and beaches where they find sustenance. Some of them become habituated to humans as a survival skill. I've watched bears in my yard eating salmon berries just 20 feet away from where I stood; neither of us flinched. I enjoy seeing them in this way, but I also worry about them.

I worry because some of my neighbors leave their garbage out or their bird feeder up all the time, and this bear could easily develop a taste for these foods. If it does, it will become what we call "food conditioned", a sorry state for a bear. Food conditioning means the bear not only is willing to be around people but it is actually attracted to the places people live, or camp, or travel because it hopes to get some food or garbage from them. The bear receives a food reward each time it approaches people or their space, and so it becomes conditioned to expect something from those garbage cans and it will continue to return to them. No longer is the bear neutrally habituated, it is now a pest which dumps the bird feeder, cleans out the dog food bowl, and which may eventually break a kitchen window seeking more reward. Food conditioning is dangerous for both the people and the bear. The bear can become more aggressive in its search for food and the nearby people are more likely to shoot it as it tries. Food conditioning is bad. Period.

So why is "habituated" a word that people normally confuse with "food conditioned"? It's not only because they mistakenly think habituated means a bear with a bad habit, it's also because habituated bears can very easily become food conditioned, it takes only one successful raid of the garbage can. Bears have good memories for food sources and they'll tend to repeatedly return to the same places at the same times of year in order to obtain them. Garbage cans are unfortunately dependable, and so can be the coolers in the cars parked at trailheads, or the birdseed that keeps appearing in the feeders.

Habituated is neither good nor bad. It is simply an adaptation a bear makes in order to survive. If done correctly and if people are well controlled around the habituated bear, it can be a positive learning experience for the people and it can even be a benefit to those bears that can adapt to the people. But it isn't the answer to all human-bear relations because people are scared of bears, even when the bears aren't aggressive. People can't be controlled everywhere, and shouldn't be; bears will have to flee to survive in most places. Habituated bears are a huge burden for wildlife managers because they have to be protected from all the strange things people will try around them. People will try to feed them, to pet them, and will try to live out their own inadequate wildlife fantasies around bears as a way to compensate for their innate fear, a fear they don't understand, a fear they really should honor.

So don't blame the habituated bear for the problems you are having. Look to the real source, the people, for what's gone wrong. Food conditioning is a powerful drug for the bear, and wildlife fantasies are a powerful drug for urban America.