
Good News for Orphaned Black Bears

On April 18, 2018 orphaned black bears got some good news from the Government of Alberta in the form of new Alberta Environment and Parks policy. Under the new policy, Alberta Fish and Wildlife staff now may “work with (wildlife) rehabilitation facilities to ensure orphan black bear cubs are safely returned to the wild whenever possible.” The new policy, one AWA is glad to support, allows rehabilitation facilities to care for orphaned cubs and work with government staff to ensure the orphaned bears will not become habituated to humans.

Lisa Dahlseide is the Education Director of the Cochrane Ecological Institute and was a key figure in the efforts to enhance the survival prospects of “Russell.” Many of you likely remember that Russell was the injured black bear in the Springbank area west of Calgary that became the catalyst for the public pressure that produced this change in policy.

Dahlseide was “thrilled” by the government’s policy change and enthusiastic about several aspects of the new protocol. She was

happy to hear the government will monitor the black bears after they are released. She described this provision as “wonderful news and important so AEP can collect their own data to reflect the success of bear rehab as supported by other jurisdictions.” She also thought the requirement to have a water feature such as a pond in a facility’s bear enclosure was a good idea. One bear enclosure at the Cochrane Ecological Institute already has a pond and they will be trying to raise money to add ponds to their other enclosures.

While pleased with the government’s policy change, Dahlseide also expressed some concerns. The policy calls for orphans deemed suitable for a return to the wild to be released by no later than October 15th of the year they were accepted for rehabilitation. Since this timing would see the or-

phans released during the fall black bear hunting season she believes this will reduce a bear’s chance of survival. However, that concern is tempered by her understanding that Fish and Wildlife staff will interpret this release date flexibly.

Dahlseide hopes this policy change is just the first step in the direction of broader wildlife rehabilitation policy reform. While orphaned black bear cubs now may be rehabilitated the province continues to prohibit a facility from trying to rehabilitate a black bear older than 12 months. Furthermore, anyone who holds a wildlife rehabilitation permit cannot rehabilitate bighorn sheep, mountain goats, wolves, coyotes, grizzly bears, black bear adults, or cougars. Ultimately, Dahlseide wants to see the rehabilitation ban lifted for all these species.

Liberal MLA David Swann shares this view

of the need for additional rehabilitation policy reform. After acknowledging how important the people in the animal rehabilitation community and the 17,000-name petition was to getting government action Dr. Swann told me that, at the very least, this policy should be extended to other large mammals. (AWA invited NDP MLA Cameron Westhead and UCP MLA Leela Aheer to comment on this policy change. They chose not to.)

AWA agrees with the need to introduce additional wildlife rehabilitation policy reforms. In a February 8, 2018 letter to Minister Phillips AWA urged her to introduce protocols for the rehabilitation of the species identified by Dahlseide and Swann. If the Minister ever responds to our letter we hope she will indicate a willingness to do just that.

- Ian Urquhart