U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Population Ecology of Black Bears in the Okefenokee Swamp-Osceola Ecosystem

Research Partners:

The Conservation Fund
Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources
USGS - Biological Resources Division
National Council for Air and Stream Improvement
Turner Foundation
Okefenokee Wildlife League
Union Camp Corporation
US Fish and Wildlife Service
US Forest Service
Container Corporation of America
Superior Pine
The Langdale Corporation
Champion International Corp.
Gilman Paper
Rayonier
Jefferson Smurfit Corporation
Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners
Local Hunt Clubs

In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Jacksonville, Florida Ecological Services Office; the USGS Biological Resources Division; the University of Tennessee; and the University of Florida teamed together to initiate a 5-year study of the black bear population in the Okefenokee Swamp-Osceola Ecosystem in south Georgia and north Florida. The objectives of the study are to determine population size, density, reproductive and mortality rates, food habits, and habitat use in order to formulate optimal management guidelines to insure the long-term survival of Okefenokee-Osceola black bears.

From its inception, the study developed into an effective partnership project, with funding, in-kind services, and logistical support provided by a number of federal agencies, private landowners, timber companies, and numerous local hunt clubs.

Field research has been extremely successful and has far surpassed all initial goals and expectations. On two 100,000-acre study areas, over 200 individual bears have been captured, radio collared, and monitored to obtain demographic and habitat data. Researchers have monitored 85 individual bears via radio telemetry and accumulated greater than 13,000 locations. Movements of bears are directly related to preferred food items (especially black gum) and thus, determines their potential exposure to humans during hunting seasons. Field work has been completed and researchers analyzed the wealth of data amassed during the study. A comprehensive final report has been completed.

The most promising hope for the long-term health of black bear populations in the southeast lies in the development of regional cooperative management among all land management entities, whether government agencies, private companies, or individuals, along with concomitant support from environmental groups and the general public. The groundwork already has been laid with the formation of the Black Bear Conservation Committee in Louisiana in 1990. The overwhelming interest in Okefenokee-Osceola black bear study can serve as an effective catalyst for the creation of a similar organization in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, dedicated to the management and conservation of the Florida black bear.