Hungry bears on school grounds
a lesson in not feeding animals

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

School officials were worried about opening the elementary school on Avery Island this year because of hungry bears.

Although usually elusive, Louisiana black bears can become a nuisance when people feed them, said Paul Davidson, who handles black bear issues for the Nature Conservancy of Louisiana.

At Avery Island, people living on both sides of the school had been feeding two young male bears during the summer.

Shortly before school started, school officials became concerned because the bears were regularly crossing the school grounds, Davidson said.

School officials feared a child might get hurt, particularly if the child failed to surrender a candy bar to one of the animals.

Davidson said the bears are not afraid of humans that they would walk right up to people in hopes of getting food.

Davidson worked with school officials and state and federal agencies to have the bears captured and moved to a wildlife management area.

Normally Louisiana black bears are reclusive creatures, but when people start to feed them they lose their fear of humans and can cause problems, Davidson said.

In another case, Davidson said he was called to a facility on Weeks Island on a complaint of a bear breaking through a window, opening the refrigerator and raiding it.

He found that the workers had been feeding the bear and had even enticed it to enter the building on a previous occasion by leaving it a trail of donuts.

Bears don't have a lot of fat in their normal diet of fruit and vegetables, Davidson said. Once they eat human food, they get a craving for it. Then they start to rummage through garbage cans and swipe food wherever they can.

"They develop an insatiable desire," he said.

Davidson said that, in one case he handled, a bear walked into a man's office, took his lunch from the table in front of him and walked out.

Another Louisiana black bear opened a fisherman's ice chest, took out a six-pack of beer and bit open the cans, Davidson said.

The muddy bear, which might have been a bit tipsy, climbed on the fisherman's car and repeatedly slid down his windshield.

Conflicts between bears and humans usually involve young male bears and result from people feeding them, Davidson said. "People just need to learn to let bears be bears," he said.

The animals need to live in the wild with their own diets, he said. People feed bears because they like them, but they are actually doing the animals a disservice.

Young males are most likely to come in contact with humans because their mothers force them out of their territory and larger male bears won't let them move into their range, Davidson said.

Consequently, young male bears are more likely to have to find a spot to live that is not the best habitat, such as wooded areas on the fringe of human populations.

When people feed them, they develop the unnatural habit of approaching people and homes.

Davidson said that, in some cases where people have come out of their homes and fed them, bears will come back later and bang on the door.

In the Avery Island case, the bears were not only being fed by people on both sides of the school grounds, but also were regularly getting into the school dumpster to get food discarded by people doing renovations on the school.

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Davidson said that, in another case, a man had been regularly feeding a Louisiana bear dog food that the man would take from the trunk of his car.

The bear arrived once when the man wasn't there and ripped open the car trunk, Davidson said.

Davidson said he has received several reports of bears along the Amite River in East Baton Rouge Parish, but apparently nobody has been feeding them and they haven't come a nuisance.

"Lots of people live close to bears without a problem," Davidson said, because they just allow the bears to lead their normal life and don't try to tame them.

Louisiana black bears have been determined to be a distinct black bear subspecies by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has put them on its threatened species list.

Once common across Louisiana and into Texas, Mississippi and Arkansas, the bears range has been severely curtailed by habitat changes.