

The Welfare Bears of Yosemite by Michael Weber

A few years ago, my family enjoyed a wonderful vacation in Yosemite National Park. When we arrived at the Visitor's Center, we were treated to a non-stop video of cars destroyed by bears. We were warned constantly not to store any food in tents, cars, or backpacks, and to place our trash only in federally-approved trash receptacles.

Being duly cautioned, we sauntered off to our cabin. Toward dusk, each of us eagerly anticipated catching a glimpse of one of nature's wonders - a Yosemite bear. When I was a little boy, we were awed by the bears in Yosemite taking huge logs and tossing them like twigs from the tops of trash cans to scavenge the treasures of human leftovers. The first night came and went uneventfully and our encampment was not raided.

After our first night of disappointment, we attended a campfire lecture the next evening. In listening, it was apparent that the ranger was an environmental purist, but I sat there aghast by what she had to say. She gave one of the most conservative talks on social behavior that I have ever heard. Yet, she had no clue about what she was really saying.

Back at the founding of our country, bears in Yosemite were content to work for a living. They would hunt, fish, forage for berries, and teach their cubs to do the same. In the fall, they would gorge themselves to build a thick layer of fat and sleep off the bad winter weather.

Then white males plundered their way from coast to coast, leaving nothing in their wake but garbage dumps. By the 1930's these garbage dumps had even made their way into the utopian wilderness of the Yosemite Valley. The bears took a liking to foraging through trash, it was much easier than foraging for berries or fishing. Watching "dumpster diving" bears became so entertaining that the humans built stadium seating overlooking the trash dump in order to observe the bears as they ate. The bears were getting free food, while the humans got good feelings by seeing that the bears had plenty to eat. But after a while, a subtle change took place that neither the bears nor their generous benefactors saw.

Because of the abundance of this free food, the bear population in Yosemite increased. Little bear cubs were raised to crave garbage rather than forage in the woods. They developed a diet of junk food rather than the healthy, balanced diet of their

predecessors. The rangers began noticing that the bears were not as healthy and their teeth were rotting due to the sweets. Bears normally forage during daylight hours, but these Yosemite bears turned to night raids as a lifestyle. With the abundance of food all year round, their hibernation season became shorter and shorter. Finally in the late 1970's the naturalists realized that they had a very serious problem on their hands.

The rangers learned that the source of the change was the abundance of welfare food. The bears were now unwilling to work for food and their general health was deteriorating, so the rangers implemented a bold new approach to improve the natural state of the bear population in the park - they cut off the source of free food. They closed the dumps and developed armored dumpsters to force the bears back to forage naturally.

But the bears were not pleased that their welfare had been cut off. They turned to crimes that included destroying property, breaking in to homes, destroying cars, and even killing their former benefactors (innocent campers).

As time passed, the bears became more and more innovative in their means of plunder. The new, armored trashcans had small openings for dumping garbage. Mother bears understood that they were much too large to secure any treasures from the receptacles, but their cubs could fit through the openings. Soon the mother bears were purposefully placing their cubs into the dumpsters so that these little ones would steal from the contents and toss the treasures out to mama. Sadly, some of these little ones got trapped inside the receptacle awaiting the fatal arrival of the trash compactor truck.

As the bears became more innovative, the humans would respond with more effective methods. After a while the general population of bears became frustrated with their efforts to beat the system and returned to their natural work. But some of the older bears remained firm that welfare was their God-given right. They became intensely anti-social and continued to destroy cars and cabins. Even today these criminal bears continue to be feared by defenseless campers in the outer reaches of the park. When these rogue bears are identified, they are trapped and exiled from society into remote wilderness areas of the park. After the punishment of exile, many of these creatures

finally return to the work of foraging. But there have been several whose anti-social attitudes are embedded so deeply into their natures that despite numerous attempts at rehabilitation, they continue to pillage upon the innocent. Many of these bears have paid the ultimate price for their criminal behavior - that of capital punishment.

The ranger sadly relayed that when the new "no more welfare" policy was first implemented, they had to put many bears to death because their riotous habits could not be changed. Through the years the population of these criminals has been thinned and in recent times have had to kill only a few. The ranger was pleased to report that each year they have to destroy fewer and fewer bears because the general population has returned to their natural work practices. Today, she gloated,

the population is coming back into balance, and the health of the bears is improving.

Obviously, what hit me was not the solution to bear problems in Yosemite. If this ranger had been in front of the Legislature speaking of human Welfare, her talk might have been much different. It was not the bears' fault that they had become lazy and addicted to the welfare - it was the fault of those people who took comfort that each bear had plenty of free handouts.

If the liberals can figure out the solution for bear welfare, why can't these same liberals figure out that it would work for people as well? ***Maybe it's because they don't actually want to SOLVE the problem . . .***