

Row over celebrity bear researcher hots up

Unconventional animal behaviourist fights to keep his research permit.

Karen Ravn

28 August 2013



Clint Austin/AP/PA

It's safe to say that wildlife biologist Lynn Rogers gets along better with the black bears in Minnesota than with the humans in the state's Department of Natural Resources.

Rogers, a popular bear researcher who has made numerous TV appearances, is engaged in quite a row with the department. At issue: should the department renew Rogers' permit to study black bears?

In June, the department said "no." But trying to come between Rogers and his bears is a bit like trying to come between a mother bear and her cubs. He took the agency to court, and late last month, the parties came to a temporary agreement. Rogers can keep radio collars on the ten research bears that have them now, but he can't keep live-streaming video on the Internet from his internationally popular den cams.

His case will go back to court in six to nine months. Earlier this month, Rogers received a big boost from renowned chimpanzee researcher Jane Goodall, who wrote to Minnesota governor Mark Dayton praising Rogers and saying that it would be "a scientific tragedy" if his research were ended now.

The department gave three reasons for not renewing Rogers' permit: he hadn't produced any peer-reviewed publications based on data collected over the past 14 years when he had a permit; his work was endangering the public; and he had engaged in unprofessional conduct.

Disputed charges

Rogers disputes all these criticisms against him and fires back with ones of his own. The real reasons the department does not want to renew his permit, he says, involve animosity, jealousy and concerns that "the schoolchildren who follow our den cams will grow up to like bears and not want to hunt them." (Rogers notes that fees from hunting licenses help to fund the department.)

And the claims and counter-claims don't stop there. Rogers alleges that the department fabricates complaints about bears, which the department says is "preposterous". In turn, the department says that Rogers pressures people to withdraw their complaints, which Rogers dismisses as "B.S."

To Rogers, the field classes he offers and the documentaries he stars in are important public-education tools. To the department, they might well look like clever avenues for self-promotion and financial gain.

When Rogers feeds a bear mouth-to-mouth, it may be "unprofessional" as deemed by the department. Or it may be a demonstration of mutual trust, as he sees it.

Ground-breaking work

Years before, the noted biologist and Pulitzer prize-winning author E. O. Wilson had ranked Rogers' work with that of Goodall and other research giants in his 1975 book *Sociobiology*. At the time, Rogers was an up-and-coming student at the University of Minnesota, already doing ground-breaking research.

Earlier studies of social organization in animals had concentrated on gregarious, group-living species such as chimpanzees and elephants. Rogers' work with bears was quite possibly the first study of a solitary species, and he discovered a very different type of social organization — a system in which females held territories and passed them on to their daughters.

His work earned him accolades and awards. Another celebrated study was one in which he described how food supplies in the woods affect human-bear interactions: in years when food supplies are low, bears come into town looking for something to eat much more often than in years when nuts and berries are abundant¹. "It's the most obvious thing," Rogers says, "but nobody had ever looked at it before. And people still fail to pay attention to it now."

Unconventional methods

Even some who find fault with Rogers today are fans of his early work. "Lynn is a smart guy," says David Garshelis, a bear researcher with the Department of Natural Resources in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. "He knows a ton about bear behaviour. He was a good bear researcher and scientist, well respected, 20 years ago."

At first, Rogers did his research the conventional way, radio-collaring the animals and observing them from a distance. But in the mid-1980s, he began walking with bears, 24 to 48 hours at a time, and found that he was safe day or night, and whether mothers had cubs or not. He still collared bears the conventional way though, by trapping and tranquillizing them, until in 1999 he experimented further and found that the bears who had learned to trust him would let him put collars on without any of those extras.

Rogers believes that the trusting relationships he develops with bears allow him to learn details about them — their activities, diet, ecology, social organization and vocalizations — that he could never learn otherwise.

Others are not so sure. Timothy Van Deelen, a wildlife ecologist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, thinks that the method has its limitations. "You have to assume that the presence of humans doesn't alter the behaviour of the bears," he says, "that what they do is the same thing they'd be doing if they weren't being followed around by a big hairless ape. Also, there is, necessarily, a small sample. It's hard to make inferences from just a few bears about how a whole population of bears behaves."

By contrast, Rogers says it's easy to skew data by injuring bears when capturing them, or by killing them with tranquillizers, and he cites a 2003 study with grizzly bears to support his point².

But it is his feeding of bears that raises the most hackles at the Department of Natural Resources. Rogers says he's studying how the feeding affects the bears and their relations with people. Garshelis maintains that Rogers isn't doing a study at all. "It is recreational feeding, just like feeding birds," he says. "I grant that he has succeeded in showing that people can be convinced to live with bears roaming constantly in their neighbourhood. But he has not shown that this is a good thing for either bears or people."

"Rogers trains bears to seek humans out for food," says Lou Cornicelli, wildlife research manager for the department — and that, he contends, is an accident waiting to happen. "Goodall stopped feeding chimpanzees early on in her research," he adds. "I wonder if she even knows the degree to which Lynn is feeding these bears."

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2013.13586

References

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