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**Inside:** "Sentimental Journey" kicks off Friday night at Highlands Playhouse, Page 1B

## Panthertown bear hunting legislation stalled in committee

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Staff

Black bears are a staple of the wildlife in North Carolina and can be found on 60 percent of the state's total land area.

Most of the black bears in the state sport an all-black body with a brown snout, however, they sometimes also have a white chest patch called a "chest blaze." These creatures typically make their homes in the mountain and coastal regions of the Tarheel

State and are the only bear species found in North Carolina and the Eastern United States.

Black bears have become a symbol for the mountains of North Carolina, and with a high population due to years of successful conservation efforts, it is not unusual for humans to cross paths with the bears' habitats. One of those habitats is the Panthertown Valley area.

Recently, a bill was brought before the North

Carolina legislature, sponsored by 13 legislators, that if passed will overrule the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission's decision to allow permitted bear hunting in Panthertown.

The bill was sent to the rules committee of the North Carolina House of Representatives in May and currently still resides there, however, according to District 120 Rep. Karl Gillespie, a large reason for the delay is because the bill

was submitted late into the session.

"HB1072 was referred to the Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations of the House on 5/27/2022, given this bill had limited sponsors, it was also submitted late in the short session with very little time to get support to move the bill," Gillespie said.

As of now, there has been no further action taken by the committee to decide on the fate of the bill, but if it

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Submitted photo

Legislation concerning allowing bear hunting at Panthertown Valley stalled during the North Carolina General Assembly's short session this summer.

## BEAR

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the fate of the bill, but if it fails, bear hunting will be allowed in the noted areas.

"From what I have read, if no further action is taken, or if HB1072 fails to pass, the NCWRC rule changes will take effect, and bear hunting by permit will be allowed in Panthertown-Bonas Defeat (and two other bear sanctuaries) during bear hunting season," Friends of Panthertown Executive Director Jason Kimenker said. "We strongly oppose this decision and will continue to share information with the public on our website."

The last short session of the Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations of the House ended on July 1. There is no scheduled date for the committee's next session, but if the committee does decide to meet again, the bill can be heard or re-introduced at any point.

"A bill can be heard anytime during the session, if it is not heard this

session then it could be re-introduced during the next session," Gillespie said. "I do not know when or if the Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations of the House will be meeting again. Given we have concluded the planned business for the short session, I doubt they will be meeting again."

While the bill is currently stalled in committee, it has prevented the NCWRC's rule change from going into effect, meaning that Panthertown Valley is still technically a bear sanctuary that outlaws bear hunting of any kind. Kimenker said a majority of the public wishes to keep it that way.

"Panthertown-Bonas Defeat remains a bear sanctuary until the legislators make their decisions," Kimenker said. "Bear hunting with unleashed hounds chasing bears through the forest in a highly used recreation area may not be the wisest decision. Continuing to protect the bears from being hunted in Panthertown is what the majority of the public has overwhelmingly asked for. We agree with that public sentiment. We know at least 86 percent of public comments

shared with the NCWRC, including those contributed by bear hunters and independent bear biologists, have reasonably asked to keep the bears protected from being hunted in the bear sanctuaries. We agree NCWRC should keep Panthertown a protected sanctuary for the bears to live in peace."

Gillespie said that he believes that the NCWRC will manage the new rule change and keep the wants and needs of everyone in balance.

"NCWRC is the state government agency created by the General Assembly in 1947 to conserve and sustain the state's fish and wildlife resources through research, scientific management, wise use and public input," Gillespie said. "I believe NCWRC has and will balance the state resources with public opinion to develop a plan that meets everyone's needs. My office is committed to continue to work with NCWRC on this and any other wildlife issue."

For more information on bears and Panthertown Valley, visit the Friends of Panthertown's website at panthertown.org.