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UDALL PARK ANIMAL SET FREE

Bear of a move

Large male released in Prescott wildlands

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PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST — Arizona wildlife officials poked a black bear on the rump to coax it into the wild Monday, nearly three weeks after authorities captured the adult male near Udall Park on the city's Northeast Side.

More food and more distance from urban areas give this bear a better shot at surviving than in the Catalina Mountains, where the animal lived until descending into the Udall Park area on June 9, state Game and Fish Department officials said. The bear's new home lies more than two hours by car north of Phoenix, in rolling hills near a federal wilderness area boundary at about 5,200 feet elevation.

Fear of liability also led to this long-distance move, said state officials. They remain gun-shy of potential litigation since the state paid the family of Anna Knochel \$2.5 million in 1999 to compensate for injuries she received when a 340-pound black bear attacked her in her tent during a camp-out in the Catalinas in 1996.

Arizona's handling of the Udall Park bear was far different from California's reaction to a black bear captured in the Palm Springs area June 14. California officials, who generally do not move bears from their home range, moved that bear only 3 1/2 miles into the San Jacinto Mountains. The state's officials contend

that relocated bears don't do well in their new homes.

On Monday, the Udall Park bear scampered out of a cylindrical-shaped, aluminum holding tank kept in a clearing. A Game and Fish official had poked it on the rump with a shovel handle to coax it to turn around inside the tank and walk to freedom. They'd already tried throwing rocks and dirt clumps, pouring water on the tank and even scaring it with a siren.

Then, it scampered out of sight between two alligator juniper trees.

Relocating bears and other wildlife can be tricky, said state Game and Fish Department officials, but they believe this bear's chances are better than usual. That's because it will live in an area rich with rain-swelled yellow grasses, acorn-bearing oak trees and berry-laden junipers and manzanita shrubs.

In 1996, shortly after the Knochel attack, state officials moved nine bears from the Catalinas into other mountain ranges. Six died at the hands of hunters. Game and Fish officials shot two others that had wandered into areas near human settlement. But in 2000, all but one of 18 bears survived after being moved into the Mazatzal Mountains in central Arizona after descending into the Phoenix area from other ranges, Game and Fish officials said.

Monday, wildlife officials said more rain-

fall means the rolling hills in the Prescott National Forest are thicker with food for the Udall bear than in the Catalinas.

Stan Cunningham, a Game and Fish research biologist, pegged the bear's age at nearly 15. It weighs more than 350 pounds

"I don't think Tucson's got a sea of green for him down there right now," said Game and Fish's Mike Senn. "Up here, there's a lot more groceries for him."

But long-distance relocation wasn't an option under state policy when California's Fish and Game Department captured the Palm Springs-area bear. California hasn't moved a black bear in 15 years, said Doug Updike, a state wildlife biologist. It has a policy not to move a bear in most circumstances from its home range, Updike said.

"We have a lot of experience of realizing if you take a bear with bad habits, caused by the mismanagement of what the people who attract them do and you move them, they take that with their memory," Updike said last week. "Once they learn to become a garbage bear and you move them somewhere else, all you do is create a problem."

Another reason California doesn't move bears far is that no good bear habitat exists in the populous state where there aren't already bears, Updike said: "You dump a bear in an existing situation, it sounds fine and dandy and works well

in Disney movies. In the real world, there will be bear fights."

But California does regularly allow citizens to kill bears that are causing problems such as tearing off roofs or knocking down garage doors. The state issues about 100 such permits a year, far more than Arizona does.

A Tucson environmental activist said that Game and Fish should have moved the Udall bear back to where it came from.

"The animal was stressed out and hazed pretty heavily by Game and Fish," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity. "There's a very good chance it wouldn't come back down."

But liability from the Knochel case was definitely a factor in the Udall bear's long-distance move, said Senn, Arizona Game and Fish's director of field operations.

"Anytime you have a bear, there's liability," Senn said. "It's a large animal, with a potential to hurt someone. You have to think of that whenever you release one."

If you make a mistake with a bear, you're at fault, Cunningham said: "Nobody got into this job to kill a bear because he walked into town. Luckily, this bear, because it did not bother anyone in Tucson, we thought it was safe to release it."

Still another factor in the department's thinking: the bear has recent cuts and scars across his chest. They indicate that he had been in a fight "with somebody bigger than him" that could have driven him from the Catalinas, Cunningham said.

The bear was fitted with a radio collar by Game and Fish officials who hope to learn more about the effects of relocation.