



ASAHI SHIMBUN

This bear, which attacked and injured four people, was shot dead on Aug. 31 in Sasakami Village, Niigata Prefecture.

Hunters decimating Niigata bears

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Worried about the declining number of bears, the Niigata prefectural government's environment preservation division plans to carry out a survey on their numbers and ecology.

From summer to fall this year, bears were sighted in Sasakami Village and Shibata City in the prefecture. They are believed to have come down from the mountains because of the shortage of food due to the extreme heat.

But not much is known about the bears' habitat. No survey of the bear population has been made since 1986 and the prefecture is anxious to find out if protective measures will be necessary.

One of the problems is the number of bears being shot by hunters. From spring to September this year, 133 bears were killed, prompting criticism that hunting is getting out of hand.

Three years ago about 170 bears were shot from spring to November in 1991, so the number killed this year is not excessively great. The killing of bears, however, has produced various repercussions.

In July, four bears believed to constitute a family, appeared within Shibata City. Trigger-happy local hunting association members shot and killed two cubs. The cubs were so small they could each be held with one hand. The shooting prompted several irate citizens to complain to the Shibata police.

A spokesman for the hunting association countered, "Bear cubs are no different from adult bears when they become excited and use their claws. They're dangerous."

The association has since asked the police not to contact the newspapers whenever bears have to be shot.

In another incident in late August, a female bear seriously injured four people in Sasakami Village and Mizuhara Town and was shot dead.

After that, hunting associations in various parts of the prefecture set traps which killed many bears, mostly in Kitakanbaragun.

In the last check on the bears and their ecology carried out in 1986, their number was estimated at about 600. Since then, the number of bears killed annually has averaged about 150.

Both the hunting associations and the environment preservation division believe the number of bears killed each year is stable since their number in the prefecture has not decreased drastically as in western Japan.

Affect breeding patterns

But many of the bears killed from summer to autumn this year were female, which is bound to adversely affect their breeding patterns. Also, since there is no proof that the number of bears is stable, the prefecture proposed a count.

One method being studied is to have people go into the mountains, chase the bears out of their lairs and count them. Human beings cannot go into the mountain areas where bears live because of thick foliage in spring and summer; they can only go in the winter when snow covers the ground. Consequently, the check will probably be carried out around February.

Why so many female bears came down from the mountains this year is puzzling, but experts theorize that they were preg-

nant and lacked food.

Niigata has never released captured bears in forests, as is done in other parts of western Japan. The general thinking among local hunters is that once a bear comes down to flatland, it can no longer live in the mountains. They believe that unless a bear, which has come down to flatland, is shot dead, it will come down again and again and become a pest.

Consequently, the environment preservation division wants to attach transmitters to bears captured alive, release them and keep tabs on where they go.

If a bear is captured two or three times, it will mean that the hunters are correct.

A spokesman for the environment preservation division says, "There are various arguments concerning the catching and shooting of bears, but there is a lack of basic information. Through carrying out a check, we can gain a foothold and study future steps."

As for concrete steps, the killing of a given number in early spring to prevent the bears from becoming a danger is expected to be reconsidered.

Japanese bears live on Honshu and further south, but about 2,000 are said to be killed each year. The Environment Agency's Japanese Bear Protection and Supervision Study Commission estimates the number of bears in the nation at about 10,000-12,000. In western Japan, however, their number has decreased drastically, and hunting is being restricted because of the danger of extinction.

Kazuhiko Yoneda, who is carrying out a bear protection drive in Hiroshima Prefecture's Geihoku Town, says, "The adult bears we see recently have become smaller." He calls for the release of captured bears in the mountains.