

Black bears show interest in artificial dens

It may take up to five years before animals use plastic structures as winter homes, experts say

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A number of coastal black bears have been poking around artificial dens created as part of a new Vancouver Island conservation program, but it's too soon to tell if the bears will take up winter residence.

This summer, Helen Davis of Artemis Wildlife Consultants installed three dens using three-metre-long plastic culverts, placed in the deep forests of the Jordan River watershed west of Victoria.

The plastic dens, open-ended at one end and lined with conifer boughs and special scents to hopefully make bears comfortable, have been placed as part of a pilot project funded by the Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program.

Black bears use hollow tree structures for winter dens, but hydroelectric facility flooding in the area has removed large trees that bears would have used to make dens.

The loss of habitat could be compounded, since generations

of bears often reuse existing tree dens. The goal of Davis's team's project is to increase black bear habitat in the area, and mitigate for habitat lost to flooding and reservoir creation for the Jordan River hydroelectric dam.

Davis says this den-creation technique has never been tried before, and monitors won't know until spring if the plastic dens have been fully used.

In the months leading up to the current hibernation period, remote sensor cameras placed near the den structures have captured families of bears nosing and pawing and investigating the plastic winter-homes, which gives Davis some hope.

"We figure it might take up to five years, with the plastic smell and that sort of thing," before bears adopt the man-made dens, Davis said.

There are up to 160,000 black bears in B.C., about 25 per cent of Canada's population, according to the Ministry of Environment.

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A female black bear and her cubs investigate one of the three plastic culvert bear dens built in the forestland of Jordan River in a pilot program to increase bear habitat lost on Vancouver Island.