

## Bears and panthers will miss Dave Maehr

By [Jeff Klinkenberg](#), Times Staff Writer  
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Dave Maehr once caught a bear using a stale doughnut he bought at a Publix.



[Carlton Ward Jr.]

Bear droppings excited Dave Maehr. "Today, I hope to share with you the elation of finding bear scat," he told me once during a trip to the Big Cypress. Bear scat meant bears were near.

He collected scat in plastic bags. He liked figuring out what bears had been eating. He'd find seeds, plants, garbage, bits of bone. From time to time he'd bait a trap and try to catch a live bear for study. One time we pulled his truck next to a trap, and when I stepped out of the truck I couldn't stop gagging.

He was using a long-dead bobcat for bait.

"No need to change the bait yet," he said, hunkered joyously next to the decaying cat. "Bears like rotten stuff."

Maehr knew bears and Florida panthers better than anyone I ever knew. He studied them for the Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission and later the University of Kentucky.

I have never known a scientist who so enjoyed getting dirty. We'd travel first by pickup truck or swamp buggy and finally on foot. Then we'd wade through the mud. I was with him when he caught panthers. I was with him a year ago when he caught a fine bear that had been fooled by a stale doughnut he had bought at Publix.

I never flew with him on one of his aerial surveys. I get nauseous in small planes. He did, too, though that never kept him on the ground. He'd fly low over the Big Cypress and the Lakes Wales Ridge and look for his study animals.

He was killed in a plane crash on Friday. He and pilot Mason Smoak were looking for bears near the little Central Florida town of Lake Placid when the engine stalled. I'll miss him. So will the bears and panthers.

Maehr, 52, was a complicated man, fiercely competitive, arrogant, passionate, funny, human. Ask a question, and he'd never weasel. He would answer candidly, bureaucrats be damned. He was always getting in hot water with bosses at the wildlife commission.

He was the guy interviewed by the *New York Times* and National Public Radio, the scientist featured in *National Geographic* documentaries. If he thought something was stupid, he'd say, "That's stupid." He irked the hell out of some people.

He was a prolific writer. *Florida's Birds*, a guide he co-wrote with his mentor, the late Florida Audubon ornithologist Herb Kale, is carried by thousands of Floridians during outdoor jaunts. He literally wrote the book on our state's cats, *The Florida Panther: Life and Death of a Vanishing Carnivore*. It has been in print more than a decade.

He wore out his welcome at the commission, got a doctorate at the University of Florida and became, briefly, a wildlife consultant in Southwest Florida. He angered environmentalists when he produced science that favored a developer; his science was attacked, and he was, too.

Last time we spoke, Maehr was still bitter about his treatment. He sent me a thick envelope full of studies he insisted proved his case.

The man liked to argue, and the subject seldom mattered. We argued about writing, sports, music and politics. Whatever your opinion, he tended to take the opposite side. I enjoyed our tete-a-tetes, but I'm not sure everyone did.

At the University of Kentucky, where he taught biology, he loved working with young scientists. Many are now working as wildlife biologists in Florida.

He also relished sparring with anti-evolution students required to take at least one science class. "What kind of a world are we living in?" he e-mailed me last year. "Sometimes I think we're headed back to the dark ages."

When his plane went down, he was working on a new book that he hoped would shed light on the plight of bears in Florida. Sadly, we will never get a chance to read it.

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