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# Game and Fish fuels fears of cougars

Twenty-five years ago, I was confronted with a challenging moral dilemma while studying cougars in the Diablo Range — the mountains that form the eastern side of Silicon Valley in California. I detected a mortality signal from F2, a 9-year-old female cougar that I had radio-collared some two years earlier. She was a beautiful and majestic animal that had apparently died of natural causes. My dilemma was that she had three 9-month-old kittens, far too young to survive on their own. As one kitten was radio-collared, I could have easily made an effort to capture all three and subsequently have them raised by an appropriate animal rescue facility. I, however, made the difficult and heart-wrenching choice of letting nature take its course, as my purpose was to study the natural processes of birth, death, immigration and emigration.

As expected, the radio-collared cub succumbed to starvation some 50 days later; no doubt her uncollared siblings suffered the same fate of a slow painful death, naturally caused though it was. I am saddened to this day by the outcome, but this natural tragedy highlights the constant challenge that confronts female cougars with dependent offspring.

Just last week, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department responded to concerns of a female cougar with dependent kittens in the Cache Creek drainage by trapping and removing her from a place long known to support cougars because of the abundance of prey and the overall quality of the habitat. Allegedly some property owners “feed deer” in the area — a practice that can be difficult to differentiate from rural property owners putting out hay for their livestock, which also draws foraging ungulates. Both have their consequences.

Apparently the WGFD was concerned this mother cougar represented a potential threat to local residents and their pets. They first attempted to haze the cougar, trying to force her out of the area — a strategy that had little chance of success as she was making a good living on the abundance of her natural prey and had two dependent kittens to feed.

The scientific literature is clear: Cougar sightings in suitable habitat are not a metric of risk, even if the cougar habitat abuts human landscapes. While I can sympathize that the WGFD may have simply wished to act proactively and prevent the potentiality of an attack, it acted in a manner that is inconsistent with the evidence in this case, possibly condemning the kittens to an agonizing death. The tragic, unintended consequences of their actions may in fact exacerbate human-cougar conflicts in the Cache Creek area, as kittens of this age are poorly equipped to fend for themselves and may attempt to kill smaller, easier prey such as pets.

A more thoughtful course of action would be to use this sce-

nario as a teaching opportunity for local residents, one that reminds folks that they live in and adjacent to good cougar habitat and that cougar activity is natural and expected. Being mindful of one’s surroundings is equally important for rural and wilderness-bordering residents, including the understanding that there really is little cause for alarm: A cougar that kills and caches deer to feed her offspring is exhibiting natural behavior.

Finally, it bears remembering that the animal known as “ghost cat” is called so precisely because of her skill at going undetected. Cougars are present much more often than they are actually seen; seeing them presents no more or no less of a danger in an area historically known to support cougar populations.

So what was this cougar’s crime? Was it that she simply acted like a cougar — killed deer (some that she stashed under an abandoned building) and remained in the area for a few weeks with her dependent young? As Teddy Roosevelt noted more than 100 years ago, “No American beast has been the subject of so much loose writing or of such wild fables as the cougar.” Instead of debunking these myths, the WGFD has simply, even if unintentionally, fueled the flames of fear and misunderstanding by unnecessarily removing a healthy female cougar from the wild.

The WGFD’s decision to remove the mother cougar demonstrates a policy inconsistent with the best available science, common sense and reason. After all, with a vacancy now in such productive habitat, the Cache Creek drainage is bound to be soon occupied by another cougar.

All too often, it is those among us with the least understanding of the ecology of the cougar who capture the process and focus the debate on society’s anxieties and our primeval fears of large carnivores. Implicit (or explicit) in the WGFD’s actions was that doing nothing would result in a conflict, with the female cougar killing a pet or threatening local residents. The abundance of evidence is that if the department did nothing, nothing unusual would likely happen. Are there guarantees? No, as with most things in life, there never are.

But is it in our — and more importantly, in wildlife’s — best interest to have game agencies base actions on highly unlikely outcomes instead of educating those of us who choose to live with nature? Unlike my dilemma that was wrought by nature, the WGFD’s wounds are self-inflicted — the result of fuzzy logic and not based on the best available science.

*Rick Hopkins, Ph.D., sits on the board of the nonprofit The Cougar Fund. He studied cougars from 1978 to 1990 and now has an ecological consulting firm, Live Oak Associates.*

GUEST SHOT

Rick Hopkins

LETTERS

Continued from 4A

your added-density “spots.” Planners, please throw out the density you intended for The Aspens. It has no community benefit.

Kristine O’Brien  
Teton County

Supersized Jackson

The town of Jackson can double residential and commercial space without a single zoning upgrade under the existing plan. Why is the town council so determined to ramp up development from that level in the new plan? Already, town traffic gridlocks on summer days. Is the council determined to build a low-value town?

Justin Adams  
Kelly

South Park, too

When residents of The Aspens, west bank and other areas say they don’t want to be targeted for growth, I support their concerns for sprawl and overdevelopment 100 percent. Being from Cottonwood Park, we have the same concerns about green-field development and traffic congestion, especially on High School Road. Throughout the comprehensive plan process, residents of Cottonwood Park have demanded that there should be no dumping of additive growth anywhere in the valley. The focus for preserving open space should come first. Then, town infill should come next.

Northwest South Park should not be the dumping ground for the valley’s growth problems. The only clustered development that should be transferred to northwest South Park is the minimal development rights from the South

Park area itself by working with South Park’s large landowners and the Land Trust, using the proper incentive tools, to permanently retire the desired open space there.

To think that dumping town density growth into the northwest corner of South Park will protect other areas like The Aspens and the west bank from growth is a fantasy. We can’t afford additive growth anywhere in the valley when we already have 50-70 years of growth entitlements. We must not rely on upzoning northwest South Park and downzoning other areas. All it takes is a simple vote in the future to change it. We will only end up with additive growth on top of the already entitled growth without solving the problem The Aspens and other areas are worried about. It will be too late then. South Park will become a sprawling unwelcome place to live.

We will lose the great middle-class-family neighborhoods to industrial traffic and unsafe streets around the schools. Then, after South Park is ruined, The Aspens and other areas of the valley will be targeted once again, because we didn’t have permanent protection of sensitive areas, we didn’t have a plan with real numbers, we didn’t have a plan that stated any density increase should be balanced with density decrease, we didn’t have a plan that followed through with town infill first, we didn’t have a plan that said no to zoning changes that can be easily reversed at the whim of whoever is in office.

I know there will be a neighborhood across from us someday. It should be complementary to Cottonwood Park, at a similar density to Rangeview Park, with open space along High School Road. High School Road should be a residential road to encourage walking and biking. There should be no industrial or commercial development along the road or in the northwest corner. It will end up a failing, congested road that not even a connector road will

help unless we only allow a small residential neighborhood in the northwest corner. Being from Cottonwood Park, I could easily say no growth in northwest South Park. Put it in The Aspens, put in the west bank. I won’t, because they too are great neighborhoods that deserve protection of their rural character and small-neighborhood atmosphere. Cottonwood Park and the neighborhoods around High School Road should not be excluded from that same protection. It is important to contact your electeds this week, pass the above concerns on to them and let them know that all neighborhoods are worth protecting.

Kathy Tompkins  
Cottonwood Park neighbors

Litany of challenges

My comments are in response to Hugh Owen’s remarkably negative Guest Shot last week, in which he did nothing more than play armchair quarterback in criticizing the “22 in 21” effort aimed at helping Jackson overcome very serious and looming economic challenges. Hugh, you complain that Jonathan Schechter never provides any recommendations or solutions, but then go on to never offer any of your own. You eschew Liza Millet’s recommendation for strengthening the digital economy here and scoff at the idea of working to get airlines to create a direct Jackson-Hole-to-San-Francisco flight, but, of course, you never offer any reason why they are a bad ideas. In fact, they are very good ideas. You demean Liza’s reference to Cloudveil as a job creator by implying it created jobs only in China, which is hopelessly naive or incredibly disingenuous in its intent. You make the preposterous generalization that this was a convening of the 1 percent. I guarantee you a majority of those in attendance are not in the 1 percent

See LETTERS on 15A