

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

FLORIDA PANTHER

The Florida panther, one of 30 subspecies of cougar, is the most endangered of all of North America's cats, with less than 100 individuals believed to remain in the wild. The panther most certainly would not exist today if not for the Endangered Species Act.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

In colonial times, the panther ranged throughout the Southeast, from Texas to the Atlantic to Tennessee and South Carolina. Historically, the panther's populations were threatened by hunting for sport, their fur, and for the perceived threat to livestock.

These days, the biggest problem for Florida panthers is habitat loss and degradation. For habitat, panthers require a large mosaic of forest and other open lands, but agriculture and residential development consumed a third of Florida's forests between 1936 and 1987.



Defenders of Wildlife

Development has fragmented large expanses of forest into small, unusable areas of habitat. As a result, panthers must pursue suitable habitat and travel into developed areas. Since 1972, 44 panthers have been killed by cars.

With so few panthers, the species' small gene pool causes reproductive disorders and increased susceptibility to disease.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

The panther was listed as endangered in 1967 and received further protections under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, National Park Service, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and nongovernmental conservation groups have worked exten-

sively to recover panthers. Panther kittens have been taken from the wild for captive breeding. In addition, for habitat protection, the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge set aside 24,000 acres of intact land and 56,000 acres of the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed have also been preserved.

It is estimated that there are less than 100 panthers left in the wild. This number is remarkably low, but it is an improvement from the 30 to 50 panthers recorded in a 1989 census.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Conservationists are working to protect existing panthers and habitat, build public support for the cats, and reintroduce them into suitable areas.

Innovative solutions, like constructing underpasses below Interstate 75, the major highway responsible for high panther mortality, have successfully reduced collision incidents.

To reduce inbreeding and curb the loss of genetic diversity, scientists introduced Texas cougars, a closely related subspecies, into the Florida panther population in 1995. This program was an attempt to reverse negative effects of inbreeding, and the initial results have been good. There have been increases in population, signs of improved genetic health, and additional colonization of areas previously unoccupied.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

The Florida panther is a symbol of vanishing wilderness. Lands established to preserve the panther's habitat benefit other imperiled species, including wood storks and eastern indigo snakes.

The Florida panther plays an essential role in the ecosystem by managing populations of deer and hogs.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The Endangered Species Act has given the Florida panther a fighting chance for survival. However, coordination of efforts poses a problem for full species recovery. When numerous agencies work closely together, decision-making and implementation can become painstakingly slow, as has been the case with panther recovery.

Recently, a panel of independent scientists designated by the Fish and Wildlife Service has identified significant flaws in the manner in which panthers have been managed in the past several years. The Fish and Wildlife Service now has an obligation under the Endangered Species Act to update its management strategy to reflect these findings of the Scientific Review Team.

Hopefully, this new information will help tackle the problems Florida panthers face such as sprawling development and habitat degradation, automobile collisions, and environmental contamination, such as mercury pollution.



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