

HUMAN ACTION DETERMINES FUTURE FOR BOBCATS AND MOUNTAIN LIONS IN THE SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, August 2010

"For if one link in nature's chain might be lost, another might be lost, until the whole of things will vanish by piecemeal." – U.S. President Thomas Jefferson

In February of 2009, a male mountain lion known as P-12 (for the 12th Puma collared with a GPS device by the National Park Service) did what no other known mountain lion has done, he crossed under or across the 101 Freeway at Liberty Canyon Road in Agoura Hills. There he met a female mountain lion, P-13, and true to mountain lion gestation, three cubs were born three months later. It was amazing that P-12 crossed the 101 successfully, and just as fortunate and remarkable that he met up with P-13, because their union ensured that new genetic material entered the gene pool in the lions in the Santa Monica Mountains.

I thought about P-12 and P-13 during a recent airplane flight while viewing the expanse of millions of acres of mountains along the north and east edges of Ventura County. In this border land live many wildlife species rarely seen in our county. Sometimes they are there and we catch a glimpse, like the occasional coyote or deer, and then there are other animals that few will ever see, like mountain lions and bobcats. These large cats are not as abundant and they generally make a point of not being seen, steering clear of urban areas and traveling through them only at night.

As long as we leave large swaths of land unbuilt, there will be habitat available so these large mammals can continue to exist in California. Yet I wonder about their continued viability in the mountain range closer to home, the Santa Monica Mountains. These mountains which go from Griffith Park to Newbury Park and Malibu have some of the most diverse plants and wildlife in the State. What makes this range of mountains less welcoming, however, is its proximity to urban areas. Development patterns can leave islands of habitat which isolate species causing inbreeding. Additionally, their survival rate is shortened from being hit by cars and unintentionally poisoned.

Mountain lions are pretty bad at crossing roads. At least two male mountain lions have been killed crossing Malibu Canyon Road, and that's only a two lane road. To prevent isolation of the large animals in the Santa Monica Mountains, like mountain lions where the males have been known to travel 300 miles, an effort is ongoing in our county to provide more safe paths for these animals to connect between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Santa Susana Mountains and Los Padres Forrest. Building underpasses, like the one at Liberty Canyon, and large culverts under the freeways, keep wildlife from becoming road kill. They also help ensure genetic diversity, something the mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains are lacking and something which is critical to the survival of their population. As studies have shown, several of the mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains are related to the first pair collared almost a decade ago, P1 and P2.

Now the three cubs which are being studied can be our barometer on the health and viability of mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains. By monitoring the cubs we will see whether they can live to adulthood without being hit by cars, unintentionally poisoned with anticoagulant rodenticides like D-Con (that have been found in 69% of all mountain lions in California), or die in fights with others mountain lions because of turf battles, in part due to a lack of room to roam.

A study that mapped the movement of wildlife between the Los Padres and Santa Monica mountain ranges illustrates the importance of wildlife corridors. The South Coast Missing Linkages Project: A Linkage Design for the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre Connection, provides a comprehensive report prepared by numerous scientists and involving over 30 agencies and academic institutions, such as the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the California State Parks Department, and San Diego State University.

Last week, the Board of Supervisors deferred adopting guidelines that require review of Missing Linkage wildlife corridor information when siting development projects in or near a wildlife corridor. Concerns from farmers and developers who don't want to be saddled with constraints on where they can build, led the Board of Supervisors to defer adopting the new guidelines. The six month public review will allow for more examination of how these corridors will be addressed when impacts from development are analyzed.

The Missing Linkages report can be found on this website: <http://www.scwildlands.org/reports/Default.aspx> If you would like to have your opinion considered during the County's six month review period, you can attend one of the future workshops conducted by the Planning Department at the County of Ventura. While unchecked development can cut off the chances for mountain lions and bobcats to survive in the Santa Monica Mountains, it is also human action that can save them.