

Biologists race to clear a path to survival for Northwestern cougars

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Cougars have been under siege in the United States since the arrival of European settlers, victims of extirpation campaigns and habitat destruction as inhabitants converted wilderness to farmland and pasture. These campaigns eliminated *Puma concolor* in the East (save for a remnant population in Florida) during the 1880s, and now the same forces—abetted by good intentions—are threatening existing populations in Washington State. A new story in this week’s issue of the open-access journal *PLoS Biology* shows that good intentions are no substitute for sound science.

Over the past decade, Washington State’s cougar population—already under attack by developers, hunters and hostile ranchers—has come under “friendly fire” from well-meaning voters as well. Ironically, a ballot initiative to ban the traditional practice of hound hunting—and, it was assumed, to protect the state’s cougars—has served only to further endanger its few thousand remaining animals.

In “No Place for Predators?,” *PLoS Biology* senior science writer/editor Liza Gross shows how good intentions have paved the way to increased dangers for the Pacific Northwest’s embattled cougar population, and how wildlife biologists are scrambling to find a science-based path to coexistence between people and predators—before it’s too late.

“Contrary to popular belief,” she reports, “and the rationale behind legislation authorizing emergency and public safety hunts,” the hound-hunting ban did not yield a population spike. The hopes of Washington’s

voters, it turned out, were as unfounded as the fears of its ranchers, many of whom, relying on hearsay and anecdotal evidence, insisted the big cats' numbers were growing. "As complaints were going up, the population was tanking," explains Rob Wielgus, director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Laboratory.

Like other researchers investigating the reality of predator management in the Pacific Northwest, Wielgus has found that perception is often at odds with the science—and that false assumptions benefit neither the state's people nor its predators. "We're learning all kinds of things that are counterintuitive," he says.

As he and his scientific colleagues make clear, that new knowledge—and biologists' ability to communicate it to the public and elected officials—may hold the key to cougars' survival.

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