Famed LA mountain lion's death shines light on tribal talks

February 4 2023, by Stefanie Dazio

A girl looks at a photo of the famed mountain lion known as P-22 as the exhibit wall is covered with Post-It notes paying tribute to the big cat at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

The life of Los Angeles' most famous mountain lion followed a path known only to the biggest of Hollywood stars: Discovered on-camera in 2012, the cougar adopted a stage name and enjoyed a decade of celebrity status before his tragic death late last year.

The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and cast a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. Now, with his remains stored in a freezer at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, wildlife officials and representatives from the region's tribal communities are debating his next act.

Biologists and conservationists want to retain samples of P-22's tissue, fur and whiskers for scientific testing to aid in future wildlife research. But some representatives of the Chumash, Tataviam and Gabrielino (Tongva) peoples say his body should be returned, untouched, to the ancestral lands where he spent his life so he can be honored with a traditional burial.

In tribal communities here, mountain lions are regarded as relatives and considered teachers. P-22 is seen as an extraordinary animal, according to Alan Salazar, a tribal member of the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians and a descendent of the Chumash tribe who said his death should be honored appropriately.

This Jan. 2020, photo provided by Miguel Ordeñana shows a mountain lion known as P-22, photographed in Los Angeles. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: Miguel Ordeñana via AP

"We want to bury him like he's a 'wot,' like a 'tomier,' " Salazar said, "which are two of the words for chief or leader" in the Chumash and Tataviam languages, respectively. "Because that's what he was."

Likely born about 12 years ago in the western Santa Monica Mountains, wildlife officials believe the aggression of P-22's father and his own

struggle to find a mate amid a dwindling population drove the cougar to cross two heavily traveled freeways and migrate east.

He made his debut in 2012, captured on a trail camera by biologist Miguel Ordeñana in Griffith Park, home of the Hollywood sign and part of ancestral Gabrielino (Tongva) land.

Promptly tagged and christened P-22—as the 22nd puma in a National Park Service study—he spawned a decade of devotion among Californians, who saw themselves mirrored in his bachelor status, his harrowing journey to the heart of Los Angeles and his prime real estate in Griffith Park amid the city's urban sprawl. Los Angeles and Mumbai are the world's only major cities where large cats live—mountain lions in one, leopards in the other.

Post-It notes paying tribute to the famed mountain lion known as P-22 cover an exhibit wall at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Angelenos will celebrate his life on Saturday at the Greek Theater in Griffith Park in a memorial put on by the "Save LA Cougars." P-22 inspired the group to campaign for a wildlife crossing over a Los Angeles-area freeway that will allow big cats and other animals safe passage between the mountains and wildlands to the north. The bridge broke ground in April.

P-22′s star dimmed last November, when he killed a Chihuahua on a dogwalker's leash in the Hollywood Hills and likely attacked another weeks later. Wildlife officials said the puma seemed to be "exhibiting signs of distress," in part due to aging.

They captured P-22 on Dec. 12 in a residential backyard in the trendy Los Feliz neighborhood. Examinations revealed a skull fracture—the result of being hit by a car—and chronic illnesses including a skin infection and diseases of the kidneys and liver.

This May. 2020, photo provided by Miguel Ordeñana shows a mountain lion known as P-22, photographed in Los Angeles. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: Miguel Ordeñana via AP

The city's cherished big cat was euthanized five days later.

Los Angeles mourned P-22 as one of its own, with songs, stories and murals crying "long live the king." Post-It notes of remembrance blanketed an exhibit wall at the Natural History Museum and children's paw print messages covered a tableau outside the LA Zoo.

While fame is fleeting for most celebrities, P-22's legacy lives on—though in what form is now up for debate.

The Natural History Museum took possession of the animal's remains, prompting swift condemnation by tribal leaders who feared P-22′s body could be taxidermized and put on display. Samples taken during the animal's necropsy also are causing concerns among the tribal communities about burying the cougar intact.

"In order to continue on your journey into the afterlife, you have to be whole," said Desireé Martinez, an archaeologist and member of the Gabrielino (Tongva) community.

This Aug. 2017, photo provided by Miguel Ordeñana shows a mountain lion known as P-22, photographed in Los Angeles. The popular puma gained fame as

P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: Miguel Ordeñana via AP

A year before P-22's death, Ordeñana—the wildlife biologist whose camera first spotted the cougar and is now a senior manager of community science at the Natural History Museum—had applied for a permit from the state for the museum to receive the mountain lion's remains when he died. Typically an animal carcass would be discarded.

Ordeñana and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife have apologized, saying they should have spoken with the tribes from the start.

Museum, state and other officials began talks with the tribes Monday in the hopes of reaching a compromise. Ordeñana and other scientists are advocating to retain at least some of P-22's tissue samples to preserve future research opportunities for the endangered animals as new technologies and techniques arise.

"We're trying to see what can we do differently—regarding outreach, regarding our process—that is feasible for us as an institution," Ordeñana said, "but respectful of both the scientific and the cultural-historic legacy of these animals."

Two people walk past a mural by artist Corie Mattie depicting the famed mountain lion known as P-22 in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Salazar and Martinez, however, do not believe samples should be taken from the animal's remains and held by the museum in perpetuity.

"We've been studied like the mountain lion has been studied," Salazar said. "Those bones of my tribal ancestors are in boxes so they can be studied by future generations. We're not a science project."

Beth Pratt, California executive director for the National Wildlife Federation and a key player in developing the wildlife crossing, said it's important to balance the different arguments to ensure the diminishing LA cougar population has a future.

"We do need data from these animals, even P-22, for science," said Pratt, who calls him "the Brad Pitt" of pumas.

Chuck Bonham, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the P-22 discussions have forced his agency and others to reckon with their outreach to California's tribes.

A mural depicting the famed mountain lion known as P-22 is reflected in a car window in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered

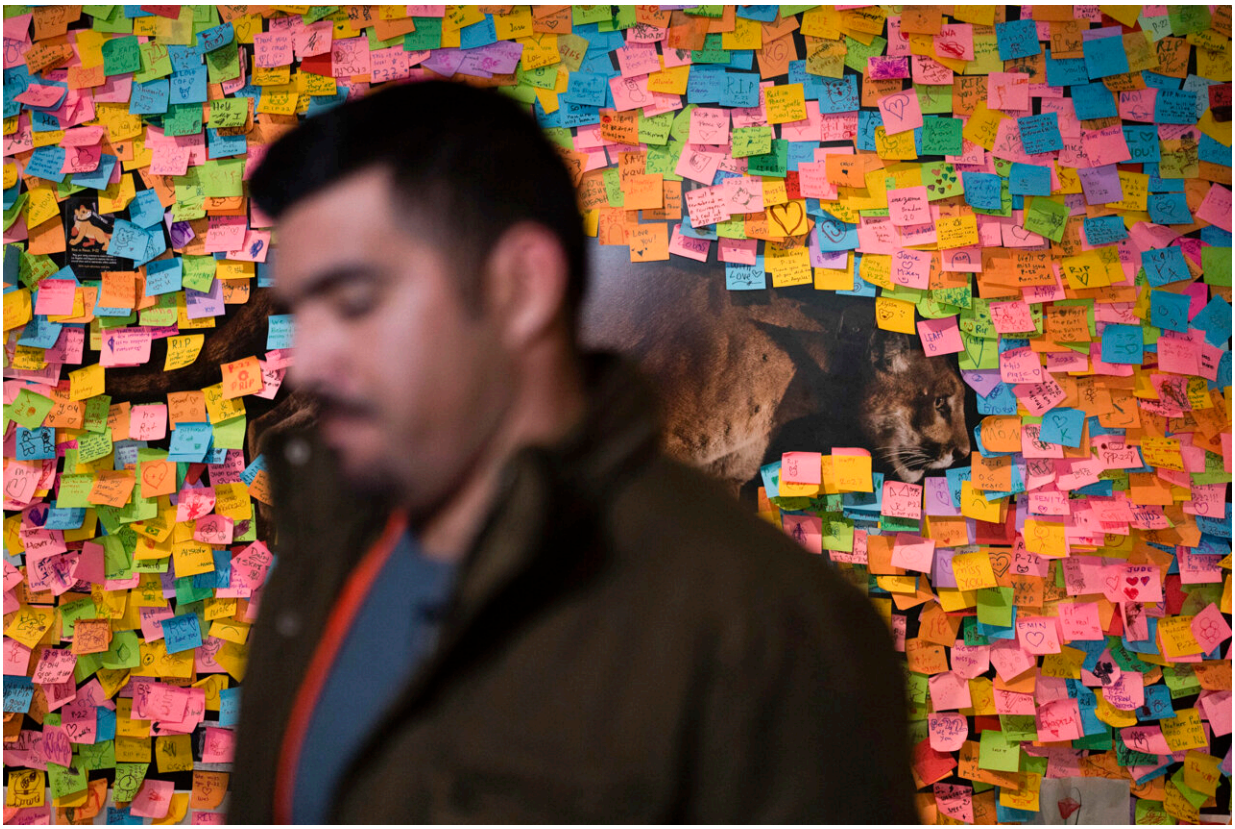
mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Visitors look at merchandize celebrating the life of the famed mountain lion known as P-22 at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. The life of LA's most famous mountain lion followed a path known only to the biggest of Hollywood stars: Discovered on-camera in 2012, the cougar adopted a stage name and enjoyed a decade of celebrity status before his tragic death late last year. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

A mural by artist Corie Mattie depicting the famed mountain lion known as P-22 is seen in the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles, Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2023. The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and shone a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. But it's the big cat's death — and whether to return his remains to ancestral tribal lands where he spent his life — that could posthumously give his story new life. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Biologist Miguel Ordeñana sits for a photo after an interview with The Associated Press at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. A year before P-22's death, Ordeñana — the wildlife biologist whose camera first spotted the cougar and now a senior manager of community science at the Natural History Museum — had applied for a permit from the state for the museum to receive the mountain lion's remains when he died so the carcass was not discarded, as is typical. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Alan Salazar, a tribal member of the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, sits for a photo after an interview with The Associated Press in Thousand Oaks, Calif., Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong



Biologist Miguel Ordenana pauses for a moment during an interview with The Associated Press as Post-It notes paying tribute to the famed mountain lion known as P-22 cover an exhibit wall at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Los Angeles, Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. A year before P-22's death, Ordeñana — the wildlife biologist whose camera first spotted the cougar and now a senior manager of community science at the Natural History Museum — had applied for a permit from the state for the museum to receive the mountain lion's remains when he died so the carcass was not discarded, as is typical. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Alan Salazar, a tribal member of the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, looks at a taxidermy of a mountain lion at a museum in Thousand Oaks, Calif., Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2023. In tribal communities here, mountain lions are regarded as relatives and considered teachers, according to Salazar. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

"I think he'll live forever in this way," Bonham said.

Martinez, of the Gabrielino (Tongva) community, said the beloved mountain lion's death also symbolizes how humans must take responsibility for respecting animals' lives.

"We are wildlife. We are creatures of nature, just as all the animals and plants are," Martinez said. "What can we do to make sure that the

creatures that we are sharing this nature with have the ability to survive and live on—just like us?"

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