

Oregon Cougars to be Hounded

By Virginia Morell
ScienceNOW Daily News
29 June 2007

Tough times may be ahead for cougars (*Puma concolor*) in Oregon. A law signed 27 June will bring back hound-hunting of the big cats with the goal of killing animals that might attack people or livestock. Scientists say the new law, in conjunction with a Cougar Management Plan developed by the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), may backfire as a way to control the predators. It also essentially overturns a measure enacted by voters in 1994 that prohibits the use of packs of hounds to hunt cougars.

Cougars have not attacked people in recent memory in Oregon, although they occasionally kill livestock. Still, ODFW argues that it needs help in hunting problem animals to prevent either kind of attack. Hunting has never been illegal, but by far the most effective way to do so is with dogs. And in fact, ODFW already uses hounds itself to kill problem cougars. The new law permits the agency to train citizens to act as "agents" on its behalf, and to use their hounds to hunt the giant cats. If the number of cougars drops to 3000 or less, as determined by surveys, then the hunts will stop.

In fact, such efforts have the opposite of its intended effect, says Rob Wielgus, a wildlife biologist at the University of Washington in Pullman. Hunting in that state actually led to more cougars--and more complaints about problem animals. The reason is that hunters were permitted to indiscriminately shoot cougars, and they often killed females and older males. When the old males died, young ones arrived from neighboring territories, and it's these animals with which humans tend to collide.

This trend has already occurred in Oregon. In the last 13 years, ODFW has greatly expanded the hunting of lions. In 1993, the year before voters banned hunting cougars with hounds, hunters bagged 160 cougars, an additional 27 were killed as problem animals, and the state received 276 cougar-related complaints from residents. In 2006, hunters shot 284 cougars, whereas another 128 were killed for their potential threat, and officials heard 443 complaints.

Though they might seem paradoxical, figures like these are what one should expect, says Wielgus. "This kind of heavy hunting merely exacerbates the problem" he says. "And apparently the Oregon officials want to travel down this same old road." Adding dogs back to the chase, which greatly help hunters find cougars to shoot, will only increase the pace.