

Status of the Mountain Lion in New Mexico

Mike Robertson
 Area Game Biologist
 New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
 Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mike Bell
 New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
 Roswell, New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

The present range of the mountain lion in New Mexico includes all areas of the state.

The mountain lion achieved protective status in 1971. Prior to this year the lion was classed as a predator and was unprotected.

In 1988 the New Mexico Game and Fish Department eliminated the last full time depredation officer position. Livestock depredation complaints involving mountain lions and bears are still handled by the Game and Fish by utilizing local houndsmen. Livestock operators that kill an offending animal are required to report the kill to the Game and Fish for verification of the action taken.

POPULATION LEVELS

The approximate number of lions statewide is 2,000 (Evans 1982). This number fluctuates depending on the interest group you are talking to.

MANAGEMENT

There are no specific surveys being conducted on mountain lions.

Mountain lion harvest information is collected by means of a pelt tag report. Hunters have five days after harvest or before leaving the state, whichever comes first, to have a hide tag placed on the animal by a Game and Fish officer. (Fig. 1). Lions taken on depredation complaints were also tagged (Fig. 2).

Season dates are currently open from December 1, 1988 through March 31, 1989 and have been a year long season in the past. Bag limit is one cougar. The killing of a female followed by kittens is illegal as is the killing of collared lions in Units 19 and 20.

The New Mexico Game Commission passed controversial commission Order No. 1-85 in January 1985 directing the Game Department to take up to 14 lions a year from five sheep ranches in Management Unit 30. In addition to this order, state law allows livestock owners to kill any lion that has killed livestock but must report such action to the Game Department. The Game Department

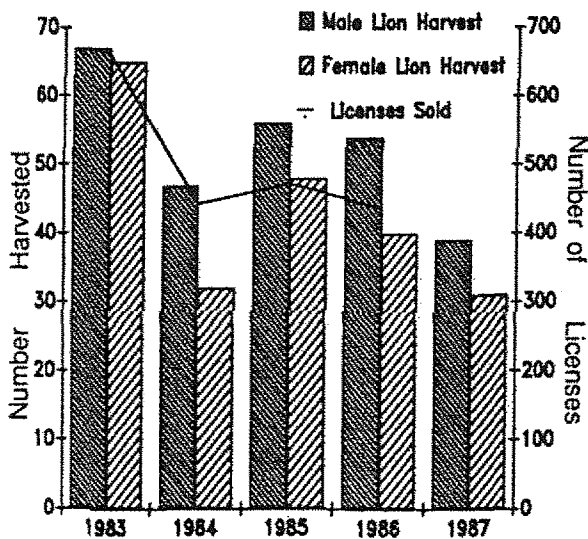


Fig. 1. Mountain lion harvest.

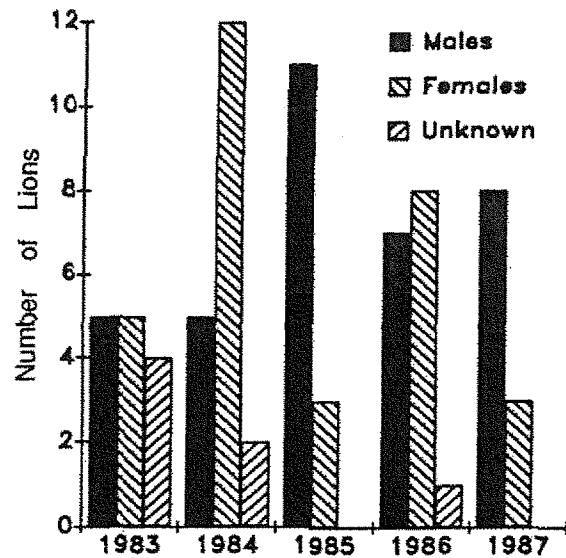


Fig. 2. Mountain lion depredation harvest.

also responded to depredation complaints with full time animal control officers.

As time passed the ranchers wanted more freedom to take lions, enlarge the area to take lions, and increase the number of lions to be taken in an effort to reduce the depredation on sheep. Each request for more freedom was met with equal resistance from animal rights groups to prevent additional control measures. Other groups and individuals also provided requests that varied from requesting the killing of all lions to providing complete protection. After many controversial and emotional meetings the Defenders of Wildlife along with three other organizations and two individuals brought suit against the Game Commission. The Commission was directed by court action not to liberalize the preventive control program. The Commission has not changed the current program, but has extended it until March 1992.

The Department has had two different full time animal control officers working prevention and depredation in Unit 30. Each worked for a year and then moved. We currently have a contract with a private individual and with Animal Damage Control of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to handle depredation complaints and preventive control.

The number of lions taken under the preventive control program was 13 in 1985, 13 in 1986, 14 in 1987, and 14 in 1988. The number of depredation permits issued to take lions after they had killed sheep remained about the same from 1985 through 1988.

The effectiveness of this program is difficult to determine because of the turnover in personnel working the program, changes in ranch operations, changes in ranch ownerships, and the controversial nature of depredation work. The only safe statement is that we currently have

sheep ranches, mountain lions, and an order from the Game Commission to do preventive and depredation work in Unit 30.

RESEARCH

The New Mexico Game and Fish has entered into a contract with the Wildlife Research Institute to study the ecology of an unexploited cougar population in a desert environment. The project is in the first five year portion of the study.

ECONOMIC VALUE

Currently the cost of a resident cougar permit is \$10.50 and a non-resident permit is \$51.00 (Fig. 3)

Average yearly income from license sales is \$3,979.50 for residents, \$5,151.00 for non-residents.

LITERATURE CITED

- Evans, Wain 1983. *The cougar in New Mexico - biology, status, depredation of livestock, and management recommendation.* 37 pages.
- Hornocker, Maurice G. 1988 *Ecology of our exploited cougar population in a desert environment.* 129 pp.

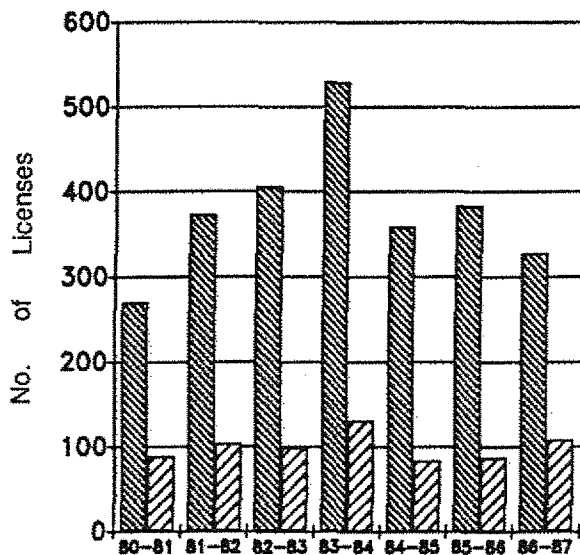


Fig. 3. License sales.