

MOUNTAIN LION FOUNDATION

*Saving America's Lion*TM

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28 January 2008

RE: Strongly Oppose – HB 2438

Dear Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee Members:

The Mountain Lion Foundation, on behalf of our members on every inhabited continent and especially our nearly 500 members residing in the state of Washington, strongly opposes HB 2438 for logical, conservation and ethical reasons. The Foundation works in the 14 states where cougar populations still survive and is dedicated to Saving America's Lion.

HB 2438 makes permanent a pilot project that allows the use of hounds to kill cougars in five Washington counties. The stated reason for this pilot was an attempt to improve public safety. However, the cougars are not targeted according to a history of conflict but, rather, are hounded at random.

Logically, we must oppose HB 2438 because making permanent a pilot project that does not accomplish its stated goals makes no sense:

- The random shooting of cougars -- whether or not they have caused a conflict with human interests -- does nothing to make anyone or anything safer. (Papouchis, 2007) The Cougar Management Guidelines point out that while there has been some success in pursuing targeted cougars with hounds, there is no evidence that the random shooting of mountain lions – either by boot or hound hunt – accomplishes a goal of reducing conflicts.

In fact, there is some evidence that the random shooting of cougars may actually increase conflicts for the following reasons:

- When dominant male cougars are artificially removed from their territory, that opens the territory to prematurely dispersing young males which are disproportionately more likely to get into trouble with humans.
- When female cougars are artificially removed from the population, up to ½ of the time that action will orphan dependent kittens which are disproportionately more likely to get into trouble with humans.
- Some cougar experts now speculate that hound hunting selects for stronger and more aggressive cougars because the less so will tree more easily and thus be killed. This theory certainly deserves additional study before we take an action that could have yet another effect that runs counter to the stated goals of the pilot project.

From a conservation perspective, we must oppose HB 2438 for five reasons:

- The pilot areas are not isolated from the regular season trophy boot hunts and a large number of cougars in each county undoubtedly inhabit more than one county. The total number of lions killed is higher, and the age and sex of lions killed is probably different in hound hunt areas. We have little understanding of the cumulative impacts across the range of those cougars. The Cougar Management Guidelines state cougar populations depend upon immigration of virtually all breeding males and about a third of breeding females. Overall Sweaner et.al. (2000) found that immigration provided more recruits than locally born progeny. We would therefore argue that the hound hunt areas are also impacting the boot hunt areas in ways that may not play out for several generations.
- The Cougar Management Guidelines state categorically that “Cougar sightings, depredation events, and harvest levels are not reliable ways to index cougar populations.” Because the Department does not verify sightings, their methods are especially compromised. Further, even if track counts and catch per unit effort were added to the Department’s current methods of determining cougar populations, the sum total would at best be useful for detecting large changes (25%) or more in population size.
- While experts point out that the population models used to estimate cougar numbers have a very high margin of error and should not be relied upon, we must argue that, whatever that population guesstimate is, is meaningless without a context of total number of cougars needed to perform their ecological role. i.e. Even if cougar numbers were at a record high for the last twenty years, the Department has not established if that would be enough cougars to perform their keystone role in holding together the landscape we know and love. That baseline for ecological integrity must be established.
- According to a recent study from Washington State (Lambert, 2006); cougar populations in the Pacific Northwest in areas with numerous sightings are actually stable or declining. This may be because cougars make their living staying out of sight; inability to stay out of sight may well reflect a stress upon their population.
- Attempting to control conflicts only by killing cougars, without establishing core habitat for source populations, without protection of linkages that allow them to roam, without education that fosters tolerance of their presence, without DNA studies to determine the strength of the gene pool, and without epidemiological surveys to determine the overall health of the populations is irresponsible.

From an ethical perspective, we must oppose HB 2438 for two reasons:

- This bill can cause citizens to believe that random shooting of cougars, whether or not they have caused a conflict, will in some way reduce the number of conflicts between humans and cougars. That, in turn, focuses state resources on ineffective random killing at the expense of conflict resolution methods that actually work. Further, it psychologically relieves citizens of their personal responsibility to avoid attracting wildlife into situations where there can be conflicts.
- The voters of Washington, who own the wildlife of the state under the public trust doctrine, have spoken clearly on their desire to ban the hound hunting of cougars. This bill openly thwarts their decision.

For all of these reasons we oppose HB 2438 and urge you to vote no.

We urge you instead to insist that the Department work to protect cougar habitat and promote conflict resolution techniques that do not impair the integrity of our landscapes. We recommend the Cougar Management Guidelines to help you through this process. We also offer our educational tools if they can be of assistance.

Thank you,

Lynn Sadler
President and CEO