

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

Letter to the editor: FWP proposals would put mountain lions in peril

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Let's skip the part where I try to convince you that mountain lions are worth protecting (judging by the turnout at the Bozeman Doc Series' screening of "Path of the Panther" last month, that's unnecessary) and get right to the part where I try to convince you that they need protecting so that you will write to FWP in opposition to proposed policies that would raise quotas by as much as 40% over the next six years. These policy changes are being considered because some Montanans believe there are "too many lions." The numbers suggest otherwise. FWP sets its current annual quota at 668 based on an estimate of there being 5,300 cougars in the state, but current scientific analysis puts the likely population at somewhere between 2,100 and 3,300.

Mountain lions are territorial and therefore, absent new territory, incapable of large-scale population growth. So they do not require human management. In fact, high levels of hunting tend to increase human-lion conflict. Orphaned kittens and sub-adult males dispersing in the absence of mature males pose the greatest threats to pets and livestock.

Neither does hunting mountain lions benefit their prey. The loss of predators leads to overpopulation among deer and elk that leads to a loss of vegetation and biodiversity, as we know well from the history of wolves in Yellowstone. As the recent decline in mule deer is due to drought, there is no reason to hold cougars accountable.

For anyone who hasn't seen "Path of the Panther," it depicts efforts to establish the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a contiguous habitat large enough for the isolated lion population there to grow to a healthy level. The relevant takeaway is obvious: Montana does not want to end up like Florida, trying to rehabilitate a species after deliberately putting it in peril.

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