



Eastern Cougar Foundation

Newsletter



ECF Newsletter

Summer 1999

Goals Of The Eastern Cougar Foundation

- *To scientifically document the existence of wild, reproducing cougars in the eastern United States;
- *To assure official protection for all such cougars;
- *To build acceptance of wild cougars in the rural east through educational outreach.

Non-Profit Status Obtained

The Eastern Cougar Foundation was incorporated through the state of West Virginia on January 14, 1999. And on August 04, 1999 the IRS approved our application for 501(c)(3) non-profit status.

We can now shift our focus from getting the ECF organized to issues concerning cougars in the East.

The Gene Scene

(By Helen McGinnis & Chris Bolgiano)

This past spring, Melanie Culver completed her dissertation study of cougar genetics at the University of Maryland (Molecular genetic variation, population structure, and natural history of free-ranging pumas (Puma Concolor). Dissertation. College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 1999). Her work was performed under Dr. Stephen O'Brien at the National Cancer Institute. She used mtDNA markers, a Y-chromosome marker and feline specific microsatellites to describe patterns of molecular genetic variation among all 32 puma subspecies. She concludes: "Analyses suggest moderate levels of gene flow among all phylogeographic regions. There is no basis for maintaining 32 subspecies. Instead the use of six subspecies is recommended. All temperate North American subspecies (north of Nicaragua) should be

recognized as a single subspecies, *Puma concolor cougar*. The similarity within and among the six groups is perhaps more important to consider than the differences (p. 58, p. 129).

What takes these results beyond academic interest is how the status of the eastern cougar under the Endangered Species Act will be affected. The concept of interbreeding between populations from different areas has already been accepted for the Florida Panther, and all wild cougars in that state are legally protected. Since Culver has shown that a unique genetic profile cannot be clearly defined for the eastern subspecies, that same legal protection should be extended to all cougars living wild throughout the east. To insist, as state and federal agencies are tending to do, that a wild cougar in the east must fit a profile that doesn't exist is both bad science and bad policy.

ECF'S Fearless Leaders

Officers: Todd Lester (President) is a West Virginia coal miner who glimpsed a cougar while coon hunting in 1983. Captivated by the wild grace of the cat, he has since taught himself to be one of the foremost field experts on cougar sign in the East. He has also compiled an extensive library of cougar literature and collected a substantial amount of field evidence. Quette Lester (Secretary/Treasurer), Todd's wife is a computer technician also interested in cougars. Chris Bolgiano (Vice President) is a freelance writer whose first book was *Mountain Lion: An Unnatural History of Pumas and People* (Stackpole Books, 1995). She's never gotten over it.

Board of Directors:

Dr. Melanie Culver, of Christiansburg, VA, hopes her DNA findings stimulate a reconsideration of cougar taxonomy.

Mr. Robert Downing, Clemson, SC, is a retired biologist from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, where he carried out the only official field study for eastern cougars in the 1980's, and wrote the Eastern Cougar Recovery Plan.

Mr. Mark Jenkins, Morgantown, WV, runs the Cooper's Rock Mountain Lion Sanctuary for captive cougars who have been abused or neglected.

Dr. Donald W. Linzey, of the Biology Dept. at Wytheville Community College in VA, is a well-known Virginia scientist whose most recent book

is Mammals of Virginia. He has been documenting cougars in VA since 1978.

Mr. Thomas Linzey, of Shippensburg, PA, is Don's son and the influence is plain: Tom is an environmental attorney who does much pro bono work for non-profit organizations, including this one.

Dr. David S. Maehr is the University of Kentucky's Conservation Biologist, and was for nine years the director of field research for the Florida Panther Project.

Susan Morse, Jercho, VT, is director of Keeping Track, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting community-based wildlife habitat conservation. She is nationally acknowledged as an expert on cougars.

Dr. Jay Tischdorf, Camp Hill, PA, once worked on the Hornocker Institute's Yellowstone cougar study, but then decided to become a veterinarian, which he has now accomplished. He organized the 1994 Eastern Cougar Conference.

Field Notes

By: Don Linzey

A supposedly white cougar was recorded on video tape in Wythe County, Virginia in November 1998. Both Todd and I have watched the tape and spoken with the individuals involved. I have attempted to have the video tape enhanced by video experts at Virginia Tech, but the quality of the tape in my possession and the clarity of the image have thus far made this impossible. The taping was done in dim light at dusk. I am awaiting delivery of the original video tape in hopes that the improved quality will permit the enlargement and enhancement of several individual frames.

By: Todd Lester

On March 03, 1996 while doing a field search in Wyoming County West Virginia, I discovered a large cougar track and took pictures as well as a plaster cast of the track. The track was later confirmed by Dr. Lee Fitzhugh of the University of California (Davis), as being the right front foot of a large male cougar. I had a personal sighting in this area in 1983.

Brochure Available

An informational brochure, "**Living with Cougars in the Appalachian Mountains**", is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed business envelope to the ECF.