

Panther Recovery Implementation Team
May 19, 2015
Homosassa, Florida
Draft Meeting Notes

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Attendance: Todd Hallman (Florida Sportsmen's Conservation Alliance and Florida Sportsmen Trust Group), Laurie Macdonald (Defenders of Wildlife), Kipp Frohlich (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)), Erin Myers (US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)), Dawn Jennings, Robin Boughton (FWC), Lindsey Wiggins (Florida Cattlemen's Association), David Onorato (FWC), Dana Hartley (FWS), Elizabeth Fleming (Defenders), David Shindle (Conservancy of SWF), Amber Crooks (Conservancy of SWF), Ron Clark (National Park Service (NPS)), Tom Jones (Barron Collier Companies, landowner)

Call in: Melanie Culver (UA), Alex Ochoa (UA)

TAXONOMY AND GENETICS

Florida Panther Taxonomy (Dave Onorato)

Dave discussed historical and present taxonomic delineation of the Florida panther. (See PowerPoint presentation).

Florida Panther Genetics (Melanie Culver and Alex Ochoa)

Melanie discussed the results of her 2000 study on the genetics of *Puma* across North, Central and South America. (See Power Point Presentation).

Alex discussed ongoing research results on his study, the "Functional Genomics of the Endangered Florida Panther." Specifically, he is determining the genetic contribution of Texas pumas in the Florida panther gene pool, assessing the fate (drift vs. selection) of this introduced genetic variation, and evaluating the success of the Texas puma introduction as a function of purged detrimental variation vs. genetic swamping of Florida panther ancestry. This research is ongoing and has not been published, therefore, by request of Alex Ochoa and Dr. Culver, there is no powerpoint presentation available.

Distinct Population Segments (Dana Hartley)

Dana discussed the background of how the Service would designate a DPS, provided some examples of recently designated DPS's in the US, and a hypothetical scenario of how (and if) Florida panthers could become a DPS. (See Power Point Presentation).

DEER STUDY UPDATE (*Kevin Godsea and Dave Shindle*)

Kevin discussed preliminary results of the ongoing White-tailed Deer Population Dynamics study in Big Cypress National Preserve (2 sites: the Addition Lands and Bear Island) and the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. This study has two goals, 1) determine how predation, hunting, and hydrology impact deer populations in South Florida; 2) clarify a reliable technique to evaluate deer populations in South Florida.

The study team collared 100 deer initially during January 2015. As of March 31, 2015, 16 radiocollared deer have been found dead. These included 8 panther predation events, 2 predation events where predator could not be confirmed (coyote or panther in one; bobcat or panther in the other), and 1 suspected predation event where the predator was unknown. Five of the 16 mortality events occurred less than 2 weeks from capture and could have been confounded by capture-related stress; therefore, they were not included in the cause-specific categories. The study team is just beginning to collect recruitment data, and this data will be combined with the

adult cause-specific mortality rates to determine overall population survival rates for the year. The densities will be studied over the next four years, which will assist with both population dynamics and population response to management practices implemented on the study sites. *What is the gender ratio of collared animals and gender ratio of killed animals?*

- Kevin did not know answer and will follow up with Dr. Mike Cherry.

From Dr. Mike Cherry:

- 36 bucks out of 100 capture
- 64 does out of 100 captured
- First 5 lost and NOT counted= 3 does and 2 bucks
- 15 that have been killed AND counted= 8 bucks and 7 does
- 11 killed by panthers=5 bucks and 6 does
- Of all counted kills (15), a panther has been noted as present in 14 of the 15 predations. With the 1 predation from a bobcat, there was no evidence of panther presence.

From Elina Garrison: Please see below the details on each of the five mortality events that occurred within first 2 weeks of capture, and were not counted in overall mortality results:

- Mortality within few hours of capture, GPS data showed no movement after capture, no sign of predation (i.e. kill site not found, bite wounds not evident), evidence of panther feeding/caching behavior, believed to be scavenged 2 days after death (based on GPS data).
- Mortality within 48 hours of capture, was scavenged almost entirely by vultures, no sign of predation, no sign of predator presence (tracks, caching, evidence of feeding).
- Mortality within 52 hours of capture, kill site not clearly identify, bite wounds on neck, evidence of panther feeding/caching behavior.
- Mortality 8 days after capture, no sign of predation or any predator presence, field necropsy showed signs on capture myopathy
- Mortality 13 days after capture, no sign of predation, or any predator presence, field necropsy showed signs of capture myopathy

In summary, it is suspected that 4 of the 5 deer died of capture myopathy, however, field necropsy showing evidence of capture myopathy was possible for only two of the deer due to the level of scavenging (one by vultures and one by panther). One of the 5 deer is suspected to have been predated by panther within 3 days after capture.

What happens with study results?

- Information will be used by FWC for setting hunting regulations in this region (South FL); all management entities will use information to develop future land management decisions—track population trends before and after practice implementation.
- The NGOs are pleased to hear that future hunting regulations will be based on data collected. Historically, there has been concern about the impacts of hunting on the deer population and how that impacts panther population dynamics.
- Study results will NOT be used to extrapolate deer population numbers for all of South Florida, because they need more areas included in the study including other public lands and private lands. Discussion ensued regarding why a similar technique is used to extrapolate FL panther population size, but can't be used for deer population. No clear answer was given. Development of the model that may allow extrapolation for panther populations is under development. We don't yet know how useful this will be (level of precision may be too low).

What about population density comparison in different habitat types? This could be part of future study questions?

DISCUSSION: RECOVERY TEAM PRIORITIES

What does recovery look like to members? The Comprehensive approach (road map) vs. individual items one-by-one; what is the importance of deadlines and providing tools for stakeholders.

Dawn mentioned that our approach is to follow the recovery plan → recovery goals → priorities, because this is a Recovery Implementation Team. But, it has been more piecemeal, seeing that we are often reacting to issues as they arise instead of following/sticking to a clear path.

Kipp reminded that PRIT is a small team, and he never saw the team as the ones getting “it” done. Rather, the team provides direction and priorities; we come together to share ideas, discuss issues and direct others to follow through. Work together to develop one message to be shared among all stakeholders.

Laurie noted that the Sub Teams can be quite effective in expanding our ability to accomplish the FPRIT goals, for example, the Transportation Sub Team has been developing products based on sound science (data and analysis) and are ready to present work products to FPRIT. FPRIT could accomplish more if we streamlined the approval process for Sub Team members and product/recommendation process for the Sub Teams.

Kevin stated that, yes, the subteam(s) are active, but longterm—what does Recovery look like from here? *Dawn* stated that we follow the Recovery plan and vision. *Kevin* commented that the the public doesn't see us getting to the heart of matters (*Lindsey* concurred).

Laurie suggested more effective outreach, she thought the workshops were good ideas, but not successfully carried off.

Todd commented that sportsmen and ranchers are looking for relief. And, unless something good happens in the south (of Caloosahatchee), then nothing is going to happen in the north.

Lindsey agrees with *Todd*. She also states that although the talk is happening at our table, there are no actions she can bring back for the FCA.

Kipp sees this process of talking as a way of sharing good information, clarifying issues and disseminating the correct information to the stakeholders.

Robin asked *Todd* and *Lindsey* what needs to come out of these meetings. Relief is the answer.

Ron stated that after hearing this answer, we go back to the Recovery Plan. What does plan offer and what can PRIT do?

Lindsey sees this as an opportunity to bring information/concerns from stakeholders to the team, then the team making recommendations to USFWS that can impact/bring about change.

Todd, lets discuss the 240 number that is needed for down listing. Where did number come from and how are we ever going to meet that with the current population estimate only from public land data. Hunters know there are more than 180. Relief=moving cats north, taking pressure off ranchers and hunters in the south.

Kipp shared the highlights of a draft FWC position statement that will be released at 4pm today. This paper is to be discussed at the June Commission meeting, and it describes FWC's position regarding panther recovery. That FWC has put a lot of resources in to recovery of this species and FWC is celebrating success of panther conservation and recognizing that panthers are near carrying capacity south of river—that south Florida can only hold a certain number of cats, and 3 populations of 240 is unfeasible. (see FWC Position Statement)

Laurie commented, what does Commission think recovery looks like?

Kipp didn't know that answer, but knows that FWC will continue conflict management in south Florida, but will not assist with repatriation nor translocation of panthers north of Caloosahatchee River. He states that although the FWS has talked about the population outside of FL, no other states have assisted with recovery efforts and FWC has carried too much for too long.

Dawn suggested that FWC focus on their goals for Florida and not speculate about the recovery goals for the panther throughout its entire historic range.

Kipp replied that PRIT could develop a plan to keep panthers on the landscape into perpetuity, instead of solely focusing on the numbers.

Lindsey stated that *Kipp* was planning to assemble a Subteam to review and revise the recovery criteria at the Feb 2015 mtg. This was put aside as *Kipp* did not want to follow through with the revision before having a conversation about panther taxonomy.

Tom recommended that we accept the current classification and not worry about taxonomy right now. We need to focus on relief, specifically for ranchers, because they bear the brunt of recovery through the habitat they provide and the losses they incur. The PES is a tool that could provide relief to ranchers, and it is a way for society to share some of this burden. *Tom* also agreed that 240# is not realistic and it needs to be reassessed.

Lindsey asked how PRIT could change the number? Need to review the recovery plan. Is population considered self-sustaining if they cannot attain a population of 240?

PRIT approved motion to review and revise current recovery plan criteria. (*Kevin initial, Lindsey second*)

PRIT accepts current classification of Florida panther as a subspecies and will move forward on recovery criteria based on this classification. However, team does recognize the debate surrounding *Puma* genetics and possibility of future discussion about designating a DPS.

ACTION ITEM: *Kipp* will develop a list of Subteam members needed to review and revise Recovery Plan. He will get this list to *Larry* for review by June 1st.

ACTION ITEM UPDATES

Recovery Actions:

1. Better inventory and monitoring techniques that produce improved population estimates.
 - Robin leads this Subteam
 - I&M has developed new methodology to determine panther population numbers
 - The new methodology uses remote cameras to monitor panthers within a certain area (162 km²)
 - ACTION ITEM: FWC Population Estimate 2015 Report due by July 1st
 - Needs funding for further modeling of trends and continuation of study
 - FWC will continue to collect and analyze data; adapting methodology as appropriate
2. Develop range expansion plans and evaluate the potential for reintroductions outside south FL
 - Low priority
3. Develop a genetic management plan.
 - Continue monitoring genetic health through annual sample collection and analysis
 - Monitor for changes in genetic viability
4. Develop programs that better integrate private landowners in FL panther recovery.
 - ACTION ITEM: Funding for PES
 - *Erin* work with *Kipp*, *Kevin* and *Lindsey* to develop a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) pre-proposal. Funding from this program would support the PES. Pre-proposal due July 8th. *Tom*, *Laurie* and other members offered assistance in meeting with decision makers to urge support for funding.
 - Continue development of a Programmatic Biological Opinion for landowners in Panther Focus Area. Complete final draft by end 2015
 - Continue development of Safe Harbor Agreement for landowners north of Caloosahatchee River in the “Expansion Area” and beyond. Complete final draft by end of 2015
 - Blackfoot Challenge/South Florida landowner swap currently has limited interest, so tabling this for now.

5. Identify vehicular mortality areas and recommend improvements.
 - Transportation Subteam has been working diligently to review and recommend least cost pathways for panthers north of the Caloosahatchee River
 - The Subteam provided a summary of their findings to Nick and Larry for discussion with FDOT. Sub Team representatives will be presenting findings at the next PRIT meeting.
 - Subteam has reviewed the FDOT Wildlife Crossing guidelines; recommendations will be presented at next PRIT meeting
 - Subteam is working on a model to identify “hot spots” of panther vehicular mortality south of Caloosahatchee River. They will provide PRIT with recommendations of where undercross and shelves should be placed.
 - Subteam has reviewed the Compendium of Structure Types and will present their findings at the next PRIT meeting
 - Laurie is retiring in September, ACTION ITEM: Larry appoint new NGO PRIT member
6. Develop guidance for restoring and managing panther habitat.
 - Ongoing through development of management plans for landowners in the Payment for Ecological Services, Partners For Wildlife or Safe Harbor Agreement programs
7. Review the panther recovery criteria and evaluate whether the current criteria are appropriate.
 - ACTION ITEM: *Kipp* will assemble Subteam for their first meeting and review session by Fall 2015
8. Review the taxonomy of FL panthers.
 - Ongoing through I&M Subteam research

4:00 PM Adjourned