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Opinion

Commentary: Florida panthers: Are recovery efforts in danger?

Like most Central Floridians, Bob Hubbard has seen a lot of wildlife in his time, but he says he's never seen anything like

what he saw on Valentine's Day morning.



By **Michael Joe Murphy**
Digital Conversation Starter

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When the Florida Panther was listed as an endangered species in 1967 on the first federal list, this iconic species was down for the count, with only 12 to 20 individuals isolated in a breeding range at the southern tip of the state. Extensive efforts have been made by the state and federal government, conservation groups and the people of Florida to recover this beloved wild cat. To find out more about the ongoing recovery of Florida's official state animal, the Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board turns to **Elizabeth Fleming**, a senior representative of **Defenders of Wildlife**, who has worked for 14 years on panther recovery in our state.

Q: Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service undertaking a "status review" of the Florida panther?

A: The Endangered Species Act requires that the status of an endangered species be

reviewed every five years to assess how the recovery effort is going. This review is overdue, as the last one was completed in 2009. There is quite a bit of information to examine. After the comprehensive review of all available information, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may recommend a change in listing status, but a formal public process, including peer review of the science and a public comment period, will be required.



A 2-year-old Florida panther is released into the wild by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2013 in West Palm Beach. The panther and its sister had been raised at the White Oak Conservation Center since they were 5 months old. (Joe Raedle / Getty Images)

Q: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says it will also review the “taxonomic status” of the Florida panther. What does that mean?

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A: The taxonomic status describes the uniqueness of a group of organisms. A status review determines whether that group is unique enough to be considered its own species, a subspecies, or a population of an existing species. Puma, cougar, mountain lion, panther and catamount are all used to describe *Puma concolor*. Some recent genetics work has indicated that all puma subspecies in North America are genetically very similar. This would suggest that Florida panthers are not different from pumas found elsewhere in North America. So some might argue that the Florida panther is not at risk of extinction because it's not a valid subspecies. But others have argued that other factors, including morphology and the geographic isolation of the Florida panther, should be assigned greater weight before concluding that the Florida panther is not a subspecies. We also should keep in mind that the Florida panther is the last remaining population of pumas that once spanned all of the Eastern United States. If the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determines that the Florida panther is not a distinct subspecies of *Puma concolor*, we expect them to reclassify the panther as a "distinct population segment" that retains full protection under the ESA.



A rescued 4-week-old Florida panther kitten has arrived at Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo for neonatal care and rearing. (FWC / Sun Sentinel)

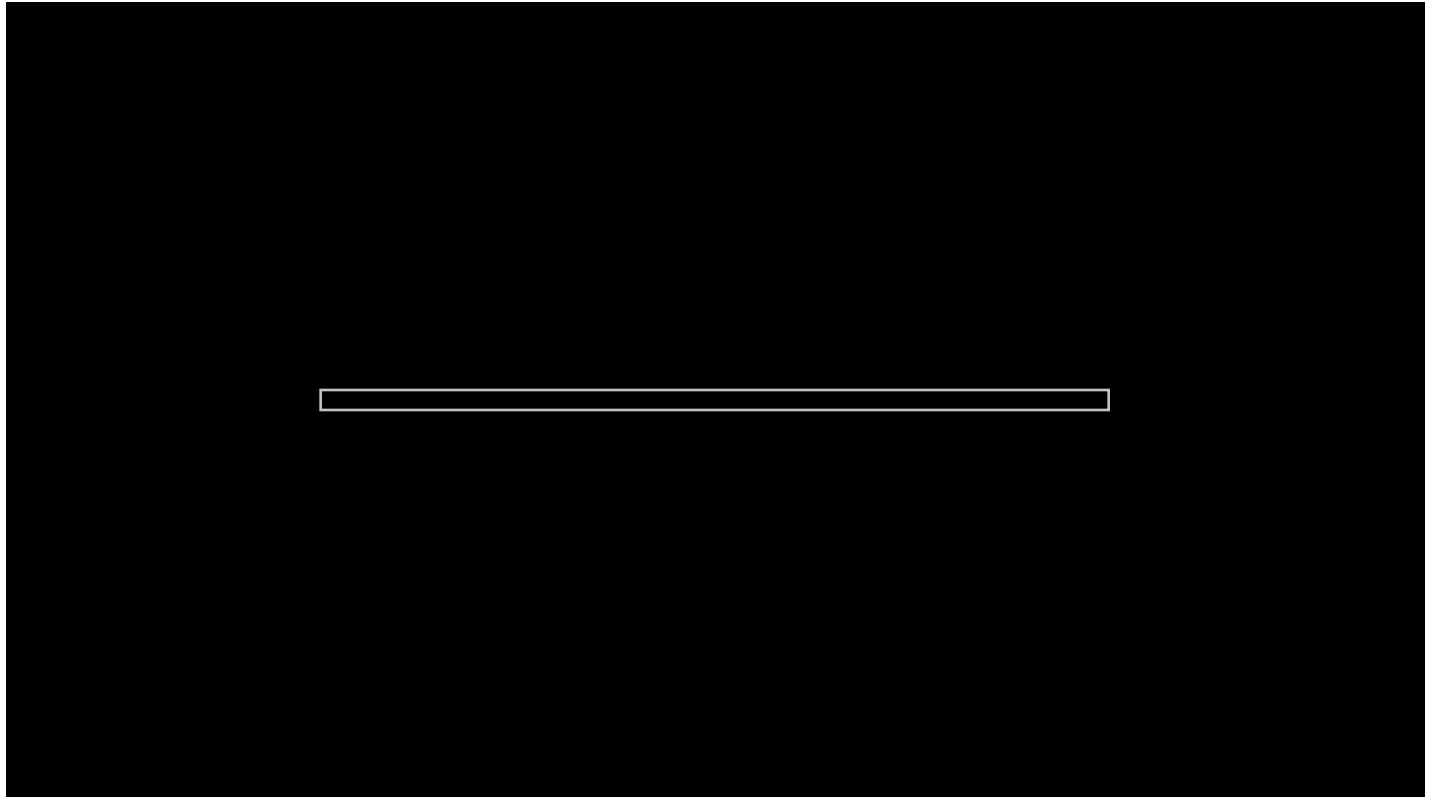
Q: Is the recovery of Florida panthers going well?

A: Many years of concerted conservation actions are finally paying off. This year, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission revised the population range estimate for adult panthers in South Florida to 120 to 230. While the population count for Florida panthers is improving, this overall population is still quite small and largely

boxed in to the southern part of the state.

We recently reached a milestone when agencies documented the presence of three female panthers, one of which had kittens, north of the Caloosahatchee River, in the southwestern part of the state. While several males have crossed the river in recent years, these females show that the panthers are moving into new territory farther north in the state. But it is not easy for these wide-ranging cats: Fatal collisions with motor vehicles take a devastating toll — a record 34 were killed on Florida roads in 2016 — and make it

difficult for panthers to expand their range. To continue to rebound, animals with large territories must continue to move across the Caloosahatchee River into unoccupied habitat in central and north Florida.



Larry Richardson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, points to fresh panther tracks inside the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Florida in 2006. (LYNNE SLADKY / AP)

Q: Does the Florida panther still need Endangered Species Act protections?

A: While Florida panthers are recovering, they still face serious threats, including loss of habitat, road mortality and lack of human tolerance that can lead to conflict. Public lands in South Florida are not extensive enough to support the panther population, which is thought to be near or at carrying capacity within the available habitat south of the Caloosahatchee River. Recovery depends on the ability to move northward into central and north Florida and beyond, and the willingness of private landowners to share the landscape. This native cat, which was present when European settlers arrived, deserves its rightful place in the natural environment.

Q: How do Florida panthers benefit ecosystems and people in Florida?

A: Florida panthers are top predators that help keep deer and other prey populations in check and can benefit the ecosystem from top to bottom. Saving panthers and the wild

spaces they need also protects many different plants and animals that share their habitat. Preserving enough undeveloped land for panthers assures the quality of the soil, water and air on which all species, including people, depend. Panthers use agricultural areas near these wild lands, so protecting panthers can also protect working landscapes.

Q: How can people coexist with Florida panthers as they continue to move north and expand their range?

A: We must conserve wildlife habitat now while we have the opportunity before it is lost forever. With more than 20 million residents, Florida is the third most populous state in the country and development and road building are accelerating. The growing panther population, coupled with continuing growth of the human population, is leading to conflicts that could undermine panther recovery. Fortunately, there are many actions people can take to share the landscape safely and responsibly with panthers. Like with bears and other wildlife, panthers can be attracted into human neighborhoods in search of an easy meal:

- Keep panther prey away. Deer, raccoons, rabbits, armadillos and feral hogs are prey for the Florida panther. By feeding deer or other wildlife, people inadvertently may attract panthers. Do not leave potential wildlife food outside, such as unsecured garbage or pet food. Consider fencing fruit and vegetable gardens.
- Keep pets safe. Free-roaming, tethered or unfenced pets are easy prey for predators, including panthers. Bring pets inside or keep them in a secure, enclosed kennel at night. Feeding pets outside can attract raccoons and other panther prey; do not leave uneaten pet food available to wildlife.
- Keep domestic livestock secure. Place chickens, goats, sheep, hogs or other livestock in enclosed structures at night.
- Electric fencing can be an effective predator deterrent. Defenders of Wildlife provides advice and assistance for the building of enclosures and other deterrents.
- Landscape for safety. Remove dense or low-lying vegetation that provides hiding places for panthers and other predators near houses. Choose plants that do not attract deer or other panther prey.
- Consider other deterrents. Outdoor lighting, motion sensors and electric fencing may deter prey animals and panthers from entering yards and make approaching prey and panthers more visible to people.

 Additional information is available at:



Defenders of Wildlife
www.defenders.org

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