



Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

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As a Public Service, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida brings this to your attention.

In late December 2003, Tribal Members and Tribal Employees noticed a female panther with 3 cubs sunning in the road at Pinecrest on Loop Road. Our main concern at that point was the safety of the mother cat and her young. We were concerned that the mother panther and/or her kittens may be run over, indiscriminately shot, or the mother may abandon her kittens due to a variety of reasons. We contacted the Big Cypress National Preserve ("Preserve") to have them do something to dissuade this panther from putting itself in harm's way. The Preserve stated that it was the State's job and they would contact the State, i.e. the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission ("FWC"). The Preserve contacted the FWC on 2 separate occasions with no reply on what action to take. Finally, one of the kittens was killed in front of Willie Jim's Indian Camp by a car near the Collier/Dade County Line.

Shortly after that, the mother with the remaining 2 other kittens started showing up at residences and campgrounds on Loop Road looking for food during daylight hours, showing no fear towards humans.. There were sightings by residences, tourists, and park rangers that numbered over 50 sightings by our count over the past year. On January 29, 2004, the mother showed aggressive behavior towards humans. There were 2 separate occasions where the mother panther exhibited this behavior. At one time she came within 12 feet of a person. On another separate occasion, she sneaked up behind a person to within 18 feet. The person was cutting firewood at that time with a skill saw, making lots of noise. The person involved fired a shot in front of the panther with a 30-06 rifle. The cat was undisturbed by this and the person retreated into a building for their own safety.

These same cats showed up the next day and night at the Loop Road Environmental Education Center with children present. They were loitering in the area. At this point, the fear for the safety of the panther was transferred to fear for the safety of humans as the panther had become aggressive towards humans. The Tribe contacted the FWC, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service ("FWS"), and the National Park Service ("NPS") to deter these panthers from human residences and campgrounds. Mr. Darrell Land, FWC Panther Biologist, told a Tribal Representative that the State was no more responsible for these panthers hurting someone than for a child to be stung by a bee and going into anaphylactic shock. Our representative told Mr. Land that an epinephrine pen solves the problem of anaphylactic shock. How do you solve a panther attack which is normally instantly fatal to a child? Mr. Land stated that there have been cougar attacks out west but there has never been a panther attack in Florida.

Mr. Chris Belden, original biologist with FWC on the Florida Panther Project, met with our representative for 1½ days. He stated in an open meeting that when this project started, the FWC had to decide to save the Florida Panther or have panthers in Florida. The decision was made to

have panthers in Florida. The question by one of the members of the meeting was "What purpose does having the Panther serve in the Ecosystem as a whole?" The reply was that the Panther no longer serves as an important part of the ecosystem as hunting pressure thins out the white-tailed deer herd but Mr. Belden just likes the idea of having the panther in the ecosystem. Mr. Belden went on to tell the group there were very few true Florida Panthers and in 10 years there would be none as the Texas cougar gene would overtake the Florida Panther gene. At which point he gave the scientific name for the panther now in Florida as *Felix concolor stanleyana*, which is the scientific name for the Texas Cougar. The scientific name for the Florida Panther is *Felix concolor coryi*. The question was then asked of Mr. Belden if he thought these panthers were dangerous to humans. He replied generally not to adults, particularly if they are in groups. Panthers attack according to prey size. They would attack children and small adults, especially a small adult bent over. He observed their behavior personally towards children as he has panthers in captivity. When children entered the area where panthers are caged, the panthers would crouch down and go into stalk mode until the children leave the area.

Consequently, the FWC, FWS and NPS agencies came up with a 3 strike interim contingency plan. The contingency plan requires the following. If a panther comes within 100 yards of a residence, a campground, a populated area, or an Indian Camp, aversive conditioning would take place and count as a strike. After the third strike, the panther would be removed from the area. Early on, the staff from these agencies realized that by doing this, they would be removing these panthers from the area. Therefore, the agency staff came up with every reason that either did or did not make sense to refuse to do the aversive conditioning. As a token, they did remove one panther, but it was not the adult female causing the trouble. According to our calculations, there are at least 12 strikes against this adult female. There have been visitor complaints against this panther, it has been within 45 yards of a campground, it continues to come near residences, and agency staff refuses to do anything about this as it would constitute a strike.

During our study of this Pinecrest panther, we started investigating all panthers in the Preserve. We found out that there is a much higher number of panthers than previously thought. Panthers are being sighted everywhere. Our studies show that 95% of the hogs are now gone, 90% of the raccoons are gone. These two animals are primary prey species of panthers. Utilizing our own deer counts and from information gathered from hunters, the deer herd has apparently dropped by 25% over the past two years. There are no deer tracks, no raccoon tracks, no road kills of raccoons. Based on this information, we have calculated the following:

Adult panthers require about 100 lbs. of meat per week, as stated in National Geographic's television series Explorer Episode titled "Killer Cats". Female panthers with kittens require 200 lbs. per week while caring for the kittens. We know that panthers eat wild hogs, raccoons, and deer. One deer equals 100 lbs. of meat. It takes two hogs or 15 raccoons to equal one deer or 100 lbs. of meat.

As you can see, this is a lot of animals being preyed upon by 1 panther. It is 52 deer per year or 104 hogs or 780 raccoons, or any combination of the above. These numbers would increase for a female panther with kittens.

Using the State's figure of 60 panthers in the Preserve (we believe the number is closer to 100), this means 3,120 deer or 6,240 hogs or 46,800 raccoons. This is just for adult panthers, does not include female panthers with kittens.

We estimate that there are 4,000 deer, plus or minus 10%, in the Preserve. Have the panthers reached carrying capacity or exceeded it? We believe they have reached carrying capacity. What is the solution? We suggest the below.

1. The Pinecrest Panther needs to be removed from the area, preferably removed from the wild as it poses the greatest danger to humans.
2. The Florida Panther should be delisted from Endangered status.
3. The Florida Panther needs to have birth control done so it will not exceed carrying capacity.
4. No future development of parking lots, wildlife trails, or any other human recreation facility that would displace wildlife habitat or increase human/panther interactions.
5. Restore the water flow from Water Conservation Area 3A to the Preserve.

When the Florida Panther Project started, there was considerably more habitat. This habitat included Golden Gate Estates, which was largely undeveloped, Bonita Springs was undeveloped east of I-75, and Water Conservation Area 3 was not flooded and had a considerable deer herd. Now this is shrinking due to development. There is considerable acreage being developed westward in both Broward and Miami-Dade Counties also. Water Conservation Area 3 stays flooded, which is a loss of over 260,000 acres. The flooding in 1994-1995 included losing the deer population.

Our point to you is this. There may be a conflict between hunting deer and Florida Panthers in the Preserve. One solution would be to decrease hunting pressure, thus allowing for more deer for the Florida Panther. The Miccosukee Tribe does not support this option.

We firmly believe that these panthers are dangerous. Be careful when you are in the Preserve or near it.

Take action by contacting the following and expressing your comments on this situation to:

Mr. Ken Haddad
Executive Director
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 South Meridian Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600

Mr. Sam D. Hamilton, Regional Director
US Department of Interior
Fish & Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard
Atlanta, GA 30345

Patricia Hooks
Regional Director
National Park Service
100 Alabama Street SW, 1924 Building
Atlanta, GA 30303