

Florida Panther and the Prospects for Reintroduction in the Southeast

*The Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) is the last subspecies of *Puma* still surviving in the eastern United States. Historically occurring throughout the southeast, today the panther is restricted to less than 5% of its historic range in one population of roughly 100 animals, located in south Florida. The panther is federally listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act and is on the State endangered lists for Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi.*



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Decline of the Florida Panther

Beginning with early European colonization and continuing through the 19th Century, the panther population began to decline. While direct killing of the Florida panther continued in the 20th Century, indirect threats increased as the human population grew. Much of the Florida panther's habitat was lost or fragmented. Problems associated with small, isolated populations of animals, including inbreeding depression and reduced genetic health, resulted. Vehicle strikes also kept the panther population at low numbers.

Since the first Florida Panther Recovery Plan was released in 1981, biologists have known that the Florida panther cannot survive and recover unless the population can be restored and expanded into suitable habitats outside of its current range in south Florida.

Habitat Assessment and the Thatcher Report

As part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Florida panther recovery program, habitat assessment studies were conducted to identify potential sites for reintroduction of the panther in the Southeast (Thatcher et al. 2003, Thatcher et al. 2006). The purpose of these studies was to identify prospective sites for panther reintroduction within its historic range based on quantitative landscape assessments. The report became known as the "Thatcher Report."

The Thatcher Report identified and ranked 11 potential reintroduction sites based on criteria including area of public lands, prey base, livestock density, road density, and human population size. No one site was found to be optimal for all the criteria evaluated.

The report was condensed and refined for publication. It identified nine potential sites of sufficient size to support a panther population. Three of these ranked as the best prospective reintroduction sites based on the numerical combination of effective habitat area and expert model scores: Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (Georgia/Florida), Ozark National Forest (Arkansas), and Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge (Arkansas).

Reintroduction: A Long-Term Prospect

The identification of potential reintroduction sites in the Thatcher Report was only a starting point for biologists to consider reintroduction. This information in the report informed the Florida Panther Recovery Team as it revised the Florida Panther Recovery Plan. While the new Florida Panther Recovery Plan is not a proposal to reintroduce the panther to areas of the southeast, it does recognize that reintroduction will be necessary to fully-recover the species. The Service is committed to working closely with state governments, NGOs, and the public

before making any proposals to reintroduce the species outside of south Florida. This process would take years, and would include extensive opportunities for public comment.

Current Panther Recovery Efforts

Prior to proposing reintroduction, the Service will focus its recovery efforts on the South Florida population. Guided by the new Florida Panther Recovery Plan, the Service and its partners will work to conserve more habitat, provide incentives for private landowners, increase the number of highway crossings, and increasing our education and outreach efforts. Once more successes are realized in South Florida, the Service and its partners can build upon past science and further explore the feasibility of reintroduction.

For more information

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