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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Mexico Cougar Attack

The Cougar Fund would like express our deepest sympathies for the victim, family and friends of the recent untimely and tragic cougar attack which occurred in Pinos Altos, New Mexico last week. Truly, there are only losers in this sad scenario, from the victim and his family to the individual cougar involved, to the species as a whole. It is crucial to remember that cougar attacks, while inevitable, are extremely rare. Deaths by cougar attack are even more rare still, with the last death in New Mexico by such a circumstance occurring in 1974. In the last 100 years, cougars have killed only 19 people. Compare this with a statistic from the National Safety Council, which counts an average of 54 deaths each year by contact with “wasps, bees, and hornets” or 5,900 pedestrian-automobile deaths each year.

Cougar attacks on humans are very unusual occurrence—and cougars killing humans even more so—even in a state like New Mexico with a healthy cougar population of 2,000 to 3,000. Many western states, including New Mexico, boast not only prime cougar habitat, but also significant concentrations of humans, with a rate of development to match the growing demands people place on the local environment including roads and housing developments. Along with these factors comes the natural desire to recreate and live in the few nearby remaining wilderness areas. However, with this desire must come a circumspect awareness of the risks involved.

Media coverage of the incident states that the man often bathed on a rock ledge near his home, which was where the cat attacked him. Avoiding recreation during dawn and dusk hours, the crepuscular time when most cougars are known to be most active, may lower the odds for such future potentially dangerous encounters with cougars. Traveling in pairs or larger groups can be a key to survival and even avoidance of an attack. Further precautionary methods include making noise to alert rattlesnakes, cougars and other naturally-occurring species found in New Mexico of human presence as well as fighting back.

Upon capturing the cougar most likely responsible for the attack, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish stated the cougar was an average sized adult male, weighing about 125 pounds. The cougar was caught in a USDA Wildlife Services snare about a half-mile from where the attack occurred. He was captured and shot yesterday, approximately one week after attacking the Pinos Altos man.

Life, be it in the city or in the wilderness, is never without risks. That such a reminder would be accompanied by this tragic outcome is not lost on those who value outdoor recreation, wilderness, and the presence of an intact and healthy ecosystem complete with large carnivores such as cougars. While we make our choices and arrive at our conclusions as individuals, so too do we as individuals contribute to a society that will collectively decide whether or not to leverage tolerance and understanding with the facts at hand.

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SAFETY IN COUGAR COUNTRY

Preventative Actions

- Be aware of your surroundings and recreate responsibly. Consider hiking, biking and running with others.
- Supervise children and do not leave them unattended, especially at dawn or dusk.
- Keep all garbage, pet food or food scraps indoors to avoid attracting prey.
- Keep pets and livestock in a secure area, especially at night.
- Install outdoor lighting where you walk after dark or install motion activated lighting.
- Do not feed wildlife. Predators follow Prey!
- Minimize vegetation in your yard where a cougar could hide and avoid planting foliage that attracts prey.
- Never approach a cougar!

ENCOUNTERING A COUGAR

- Stay clam and back away slowly. Do not turn your back, run or bend over.
- Avoid looking like prey. Try to make yourself appear as big as possible, make eye contact, open your jacket, raise your arms.
- If a lion is aggressive, throw rocks and sticks, yell as loud as you can. Always fight back and do not play dead.