

COUGARS IN CANADA:

Given abundant wilderness and cougar populations, Canada provides an important opportunity for global cougar conservation. Existing at the northern extreme of the world's cougar distribution, most Canadian cougars are distributed within the provinces of British Columbia (BC) and Alberta. Recent population estimates are 4000-6000 in BC and 800-1200 in Alberta. Cougars, however, do occur sporadically throughout other Canadian provinces and territories.

In contrast with many other jurisdictions, Canada provides a particularly important opportunity for cougar conservation as BC and Alberta are large in geographic area, but relatively small in terms of human population. Importantly, cougar habitat in Canada lies in mostly public as opposed to private land. Furthermore, cougars in Canada generally form part of complex multipredator-multiprey systems, which include grizzly bears and wolves that once inhabited many other parts of the continent.

Despite this conservation promise, cougars in Canada have been subjected, both historically and currently, to exploitation and persecution by humans. As elsewhere in North America, Canadian cougars have endured bounties, which may have extirpated eastern cougar populations. Regulations for hunting cougars in BC and Alberta began in the 1960s. Within Alberta's cougar management plan, there is a total quota and female subquota hunting system. Although BC lacks a comprehensive management strategy, the province has a general cougar hunting season, which limits the number of cougars an individual hunter can legally kill. Any total number of hunters, however, is permitted. BC has female quotas in some regions and, in some, pursuit-only hunting. Notably, based on several public opinion polls, most British Columbians do not support trophy hunting of large carnivores.

In addition to trophy hunting, cougars in Canada face many continuing conservation issues including habitat loss/fragmentation and lethal predator control. For example, cougars in BC are lethally controlled as a component of recovery plans for endangered mountain caribou. Meanwhile, the protection of critical habitat for caribou forms only a small part of the recovery plans.

Another conservation concern in BC is the fact that Vancouver Island's cougar population is likely poorly connected to the mainland; indeed, all BC coastal cougars occupy naturally fragmented habitat in the form of mountains, islands, and inlets. Compounding this, BC - and Vancouver Island especially - is an international hotspot for negative cougar-human encounters.

To gain insight into these conservation issues, there are several ongoing cougar research projects in Canada. Complementing these efforts, we have identified additional urgent research priorities. Based on our analysis of knowledge gaps in BC, we are proposing a potentially non-invasive study, which might include understanding the ecological, evolutionary, and ethical implications of hunting cougars on individual welfare and population persistence.

In addition to conducting research, our team advocates for science- and ethics-based conservation strategies for cougars in Canada. A conservation and welfare plan for cougars that would be in the common interest of Canadians might include protection of a large network of connected habitat for cougars and their prey, freedom from (over)exploitation and persecution, and non-lethal strategies to reduce the risks of cougar-human conflict. This vision for cougar-human co-existence is founded on contemporary scientific information, best principles in conservation biology, and a modern ethical framework related to human-carnivore relationships.

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