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Killing animals for a 'recreational opportunity' may sound cruel and unnecessary, and it is. Yet this is precisely the current state of affairs in Nebraska where a new hunting season for cougars has been approved by the Nebraska Game and Parks [NGP] Commission.

The necessity to dominate the natural world has deep roots in our common ancestral heritage.

It appears that paid government officials decide the fate of our wildlife species not based on science, but on pressure by a minority of citizens who do not want cougars or who simply enjoy killing them. To manage wildlife according to consumptive desires instead of about what's best for animals and the environment is neither democracy nor science.

Fewer than ten percent of Americans hunt while millions more recreate as non-consumptive users who incorporate their appreciation of natural resources into their family values. "Game agencies aren't set up for the participation of the non-hunter in their version of 'wild-life conservation,'" says Cara Blessley Lowe, co-founder of the national conservation organization, The Cougar Fund. All of the written comments presented to NGP Commissioners at the meeting in Chadron were in opposition to the mountain lion hunt recommended by staff. Many of the people present in Lincoln last Friday supported a fair and humane policy. Nebraska native, internationally acclaimed wildlife photographer and Cougar Fund co-founder Thomas D. Mangelsen says, "If you're not interested in killing an animal, there is no box to tick, so essentially your voice pretty much goes unheard."

The politically appointed commission is tasked with the following mission:

'The mission of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is stewardship of the state's fish, wildlife, park, and outdoor recreation resources in the best long-term interests of the people and those resources. To accomplish that purpose, the Commission plans and implements its policies and programs efficiently and objectively; maintains a rich and diverse environment in Nebraska's lands and waters; provides outdoor recreation opportunities;

manages wildlife resources for the maximum benefit of the people; and attempts to help Nebraskans appreciate their role in the natural world.'

The definition of stewardship is the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. To be responsible the NGP Commission needs to take into account all the credible information they have at their disposal and ALL the stakeholders. The beliefs and personal sources of information that only small segments of the population cling to may not be the basis of stewardship. The best long-term interests of the people are served by the proven emergency response plan, which deals with atypical encounters and depredation and in maintaining the balance that will sustain future generations. The best long-term interests of the resources are in acknowledging the symbiotic relationship of predators to the environment and managing for their existence not their demise. Expanding the constituency to embrace positive and productive appreciation of the diverse beliefs of all participants can do this.

The Cougar Fund has called attention to the inhumane methods used to hunt cougars and the unacceptable collateral of orphaned kittens. Cougars are identified as a keystone species, without which other ecological systems collapse. Preliminary research points to the value of targeted predation by cougars as a possible component in reducing the spread of devastating ungulate diseases.

Our disappointment in the commission's decision will be a catalyst for our renewed efforts to provide information and education about the lives of predators—information that will inspire conservation of viable populations of these incredible animals in ways that minimizes conflict with humans.