

Mountain Lion-Human Interaction Studied

By Katherine L. Jope

Numerous mountain lion incidents, resulting in human injury, have occurred throughout the West with increasing frequency in recent years. To help address this growing problem, a workshop on interactions between mountain lions and people was held in Denver on April 24-26, hosted by the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The workshop was co-sponsored by the NPS, USFWS, USFS, USDA Extension Service, BLM, and the Colorado Chapter of the Wildlife Society, plus 14 state and provincial wildlife agencies. The purpose of the workshop, attended by about 300, was to bring people together and search for patterns in the incidents.

Incidents seem to occur most often where suburban developments are expanding into mountain lion habitat. Other factors that appear to contribute to the likelihood of incidents are (1) residents feeding deer; (2) high deer populations; (3) people keeping dogs, cats, ducks, geese, or other small animals outdoors, and (4) keeping pet food outdoors.

Incidents involving hikers and joggers have occurred primarily in areas where deer populations are high. The presence of a dog seems to contribute to likelihood of attack. Children are victims more often than adults.

Evidence supports a theory that intensive hunting contributes to the likelihood of attacks. Since most mountain lion hunting is done using packs of hounds, the lions most likely to escape are the more aggressive ones, while the more passive mountain lions are removed. The consequence of this selection may be a population with a tendency toward more aggressive behavior. Of the 50 injury attacks recorded, 29 occurred in British Columbia, where there is intensive hunting.

The behavior displayed in these incidents is typical predatory behavior. There is little doubt that the intent is to prey on the person or domestic animal involved. Any person who encounters a mountain lion that does not run away should treat the situation as threatening. The recommendation is for the person threatened to behave as aggressively as possible, trying to appear dangerous to the mountain lion.

There was some tendency for dispersing yearlings to be involved in incidents more than adult mountain lions. No association was found with abnormalities such as disease or starvation.

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