



ARIZONA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

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Arizona Wildlife Federation

Position Statement on Mountain Lions

The mountain lion (a.k.a. cougar or puma), is recognized as a Big Game species by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD). Any properly licensed hunter may take one lion per year. The season is virtually year-long over most of the state. In recent years 7,000 to 10,000 lion tags have been sold annually to sport hunters, each tag allowing the taking of one lion. Despite the relatively large number of tags sold, and an Arizona lion population estimated by AZGFD of 2,500 to 3,000 lions, the total annual harvest averages less than 300 lions. Most tags are sold to big game hunters who hope they can beat the odds and find a lion incidental to pursuing deer, elk, or other big game. Actually, most lions taken by sportsmen are animals that have been treed by specially trained hounds owned by professional lion hunters.

While mountain lions are capable of taking down prey as large as deer and even elk, they rarely attack humans. Lions are among the shyest of large Arizona wildlife and typically avoid and are seldom seen by people. While there is no record of a human in Arizona being attacked by a lion in recent history, people in other Western States and Canada have indeed been attacked and even killed. Information on the circumstances surrounding most of these attacks is limited, but apparently they seldom happen in wilderness situations, but rather occur near human habitation where the lions had become habituated to the presence of and lost their instinctive fear of humans.

The recent situation in Sabino Canyon in the Catalina Mountains near Tucson may illustrate how an otherwise shy animal, fearful of humans, loses its fear and becomes emboldened in the presence of people. Sabino Canyon is a popular recreation area for the people of Tucson. In addition the lower slopes near the canyon have been developed as residential areas. Over the past year, people have repeatedly reported abnormal behavior by local lions. According to reports, three or four lions have repeatedly been observed showing no signs of being either shy or fearful of people. While no one had been attacked, people became fearful that it might be only a matter of time before someone might be. They reported their concerns to AZGFD. As reports continued the Department decided to take preemptive action and announced they would send field people into the area to remove the offending lions before one of them attacked someone.

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News of the Department's intentions upset people who thought the danger to people was overblown and who objected to the killing of any lions. The furor caused the AZGFD to waffle and to first change its mind about killing or trapping the lions and, then suddenly, when another lion observation was reported, send in trappers who snared and tranquilized the lion and removed it to a penned facility in Scottsdale. Governor Napolitano joined the chorus of animal rights activists and publicly criticized the AZGFD for mishandling the situation. Apparently the governor thought she and her staff knew more about how to handle a delicate wildlife problem than the Department with its staff of highly trained and experienced biologists. She indicated that if the director of AZGFD had not been protected by law from being dismissed she would have fired him and replaced with one of her "experts." Even more disturbing, the Governor indicated her desire to change the law so that she could hire and fire the director at will.

The Arizona Wildlife Federation, the state's oldest conservation organization, has strongly supported the Arizona Game and Fish Department since it was instrumental in enacting the 1929 law that established the Commission/Department form of wildlife administration. Over the years, the AWF has fought hard against bills that would have replaced AZGFD with something more to the liking of some of the state's governors and the politicians sympathetic with these governors' views.

We strongly disagree with Governor Napolitano's position on this lion controversy and with her desire to have complete control over the AZGFD. Such would be the result of her having the power to hire and fire the director, because that would, in effect, give her the power to hire and fire all "uncovered positions." These are the administrative and supervisory positions not protected by the rules of the state's personnel department. That would include all branch chiefs, assistant directors as well as the director. The result could well be chaos in the operations of the Department. The AWF is confident the states sportsmen and others interested in the sound management of Arizona's wildlife would be equally opposed to giving wildlife management back to the politicians of this state.