OPPOSE: Senate Bill 6287 “Concerning a pilot program for cougar control.”

I am requesting that you vote NO on SB 6287.

In 1996 63% of voters approved Initiative 655 to limit the use of dogs to hunt cougars to specifically defined circumstances. The Initiative’s ‘NO’ vote was so thin, that the ‘YES’ vote of Benton County alone was sufficient to pass the ban on hound hunting and bear baiting.

A WDFW sponsored survey in 2008 included this analysis on one section:

“Trend: Support for reducing predators is less in 2008 (unweighted data) than it was in 2002 for three of the four reasons:

- to address human safety (84% in 2002, 63% in 2008),
- to protect threatened or endangered species (76% in 2002, 64% in 2008), and
- to prevent loss of domestic animals or pets (69% in 2002, 53% in 2008).

Support for reducing predators to increase game populations was about the same in the two years of study (40% in 2002, 42% in 2008).”

In a hunting attitudes survey sponsored by WDFW one of the outcomes was that:

“90% of respondents thought that scientific information was very or somewhat important in making game management decisions, with a large majority (68%) rating scientific information as very important.”

From the 2008 survey regarding cougars:

“Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of eleven statements pertaining to cougar management in Washington State. Over three-quarters of respondents agreed with the following statements:

- “Livestock and pet owners who live in cougar habitat should be held responsible for taking steps to secure their animals” (93%);
- “Cougars are an important and essential component of Washington ecosystems” (92%);
- “Cougars were here before humans and have an inherent right to live in Washington” (92%);
- “Cougars are part of the legacy I want to leave to future people of Washington” (91%);
- “Individuals living near cougars should be held responsible for taking steps to minimize the chance of human/cougar conflict” (90%);
- “I derive satisfaction from just knowing cougars are present in Washington” (83%);
- “Large predators such as cougars help to control populations of large game species” (77%).”

The WSU research science of the effects of hunting on cougars is now published. **Hunting cougars increases depredation and cougar/human conflict.** The current RCWs allow the use of hounds in specified circumstances, and so-called “pilot programs” do nothing to improve public safety, nor to reduce complaints, and may exacerbate conflicts and depredations.
Research from the University of Washington supports idea that we can coexist in close proximity to cougars:

“Low levels of confirmed interactions coupled with exceedingly low interaction rates calls into question the validity of management decisions based on interaction reports while suggesting the perceived level of risk from cougars in residential areas disproportionally exceeds actual risk.” (University of Washington (2010) Cougar Ecology, Behavior, and Interactions with People in a Wildland-Urban Environment in Western Washington, Brian N. Kertson, Abstract)

“[R]emoval of individual cougars in higher quality habitats could have the unintended consequence of increased cougar use because a home range vacancy increases the probability of use by multiple individuals until residency of a single individual is established.”

“Many places in the western United States contain substantial suitable cougar habitat despite high levels of residential development and urban sprawl. Wildlife managers and educators must inform citizens, without being alarmist, that some backyards, neighborhood greenbelts, and urban forests are used by cougars.”

(Cougar space use and movements in the wildland—urban landscape of western Washington, Brian N. Kertson, Rocky D. Spencer, John M. Marzluff, Jeff Hepinstall-Cymerman and Christian E. Grue Ecological Applications Vol. 21, No. 8 (December 2011).)

Science is telling us that reduced cougar populations may lead to increased conflict and depredations. The following is WDFW’s listing of cougar populations:

The WDFW Game Management Plan July 2003 - June 2009 states:
“A more realistic estimate of statewide cougar abundance is about 2,600 animals.”

On the (undated) WDFW web page “Living with Wildlife,” the section titled “Cougars (Mountain Lions)” states:
“The cougar population for the year 2008 was estimated to be 2000 to 2,500 animals.”
http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/cougars.html

In “Cougar Outreach and Education in Washington State November 2010,” we learn that “Washington’s cougar population is about 1,900 to 2,100 resident animals (excludes transient subadults), including kittens.”

The WDFW Game Management Plan July 2003 - June 2009 states:
“Since 1996, the shift to harvesting more females and younger animals (as well as more total animals) likely is causing the statewide cougar population to decline.”

In 2006, Washington State scientists sounded an alarm; the authors concluded their abstract thusly (my emphasis):

“Contrary to accepted belief, our findings suggest that **cougars** in the Pacific Northwest are currently **declining**. Increased conflicts between cougars and humans in this area could be the result of the 1) very young age structure of the population caused by heavy hunting, 2) increased human intrusion into cougar
habitat, 3) low level of social acceptance of cougars in the area, or 4) habituation of cougars to humans. To help preserve this population, we recommend reduced levels of exploitation, particularly for adult females, continuous monitoring, and collaborative efforts of managers from adjacent states and provinces.”

http://www.jstor.org/pss/3803567

Killing toms increase conflicts, and killing females leads to population declines. The science is clear, we do not need another pilot program for public safety, we need education and outreach.

Direct expenditures in Washington State on Wildlife Watching, according to the most recent US FWS survey is $3.2 Billion, about 1.7 times the apple crop, about half of all Washington crops combined, 4.5 times cattle-ranching revenues, and almost nine (9) times hunting expenditures. The Legislature should work to entice more wildlife tourism to Washington, a growth industry, and cease submitting hound hunting bills annually. It is an easy decision: the vast majority wants cougars in Washington State; the vast majority do not want hound-hunting; scientists tell us cougars are necessary for environmental health; and data from Washington State scientific research tells us that killing cougars causes problems on the landscape.

Support the People’s desire to strictly limit hounding; honor the research paid for by the People: vote NO on SB 6287.

Thank you.

Bob McCoy
Effects of Remedial Sport Hunting on Cougar Complaints and Livestock Depredations

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Abstract

Remedial sport hunting of predators is often used to reduce predator populations and associated complaints and livestock depredations. We assessed the effects of remedial sport hunting on reducing cougar complaints and livestock depredations in Washington from 2005 to 2010 (6 years). The number of complaints, livestock depredations, cougars harvested, estimated cougar populations, human population and livestock populations were calculated for all 39 counties and 136 GMUs (game management units) in Washington. The data was then analyzed using a negative binomial generalized linear model to test for the expected negative relationship between the number of complaints and depredations in the current year with the number of cougars harvested the previous year. As expected, we found that complaints and depredations were positively associated with human population, livestock population, and cougar population. However, contrary to expectations we found that complaints and depredations were most strongly associated with cougars harvested the previous year. The odds of increased complaints and livestock depredations increased dramatically (36 to 240%) with increased cougar harvest. We suggest that increased young male immigration, social disruption of cougar populations, and associated changes in space use by cougars caused by increased hunting resulted in the increased complaints and livestock depredations. Widespread indiscriminate hunting does not appear to be an effective preventative and remedial method for reducing predator complaints and livestock depredations.


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[Part of discussion area of paper (my emphasis):]

... It appears that remedial sport hunting to reduce complaints and depredations is actually associated with increased, not decreased, complaints and depredations the following year. 

Our results are supported by a case study from two Washington cougar populations, where one was lightly hunted and one heavily hunted. The lightly hunted population (11±0.04 mortality rate) with a net male emigration rate of –12% [16], was located in Kittitas County (2478 mi²) with an average 38,842 people, 21,441 large livestock, and 138 cougars. Kittitas County had an average of 6.33 total complaints/year, 2.12 verified complaints/year, 0.66 livestock depredations/year and 0.83 total depredations/year (Table 7). The heavily hunted (0.24±0.07 mortality rate) population with a net male immigration rate of +11%, was located in Stevens County (2,297 mi²) and had 42,032 people, 22,293 large livestock and 207 cougars. Stevens County had an average number of 38.16 total complaints/year, 6.00 verified complaints/year, 2.66 livestock depredations/year, and 3.67 total depredations/year (Table 8). Stevens county had 1.5 times (50% more) as many cougars as Kittitas county, but had 3–6 times as many complaints and depredations. It appears the putative solution (heavy hunting) may have actually been exacerbating the problem in Stevens County.

Remedial hunting of cougars, in Washington, was associated with increased, not decreased, complaints and depredations. We encourage other researchers to test for the efficacy of remedial hunting on other carnivore species such as black bears, brown bears, grizzly bears, jaguars, leopards, lions and tigers to see if the source-sink hypothesis generalizes to those species as well.
Benton County’s YES vote was enough to pass I-655
- Counties against I-655 cast 83,000 total votes (44% YES to 56% NO)
- Benton County cast 52,000 total votes (61% YES to 39% NO)
- Benton's YES margin of 11,542 votes beat the NO vote margin of 10,574
- Statewide I-655 passed by 572,192 votes
Scientists now understand better the environmental effects of removing apex predators, and the results are not good. A scientific study compared Zion National Park to a nearby area, North Creek. North Creek had a stable cougar population.

“Increases in human visitors in Zion Canyon apparently reduced cougar (Puma concolor) densities, which subsequently led to higher mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) densities, higher browsing intensities and reduced recruitment of riparian cottonwood trees (Populus fremontii), increased bank erosion, and reductions in both terrestrial and aquatic species abundance. These results may have broad implications with regard to our understanding of alternative ecosystem states where large carnivores have been removed or are being recovered.”

(“Linking a cougar decline, trophic cascade, and catastrophic regime shift in Zion National Park”
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