

# **Public Acceptability of Florida Panther Reintroduction**

## **Final Report**

**June 30, 1998**

**This Report Is Based on Input from  
Community Workshops in Columbia County**

**The Study Process Was Conducted by**



For the  
**Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission**

# **Abstract**

## **Public Acceptability of Florida Panther Reintroduction**

The Study Process Was Conducted and the Report Prepared by

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Panther reintroduction in North Florida is a controversial issue. Determining if and how reintroduction happens requires consideration of human and natural factors. Two studies were conducted during 1988-89 and 1992-95, which involved the experimental release of Texas Cougars. The studies showed that the Florida Panther could survive biologically in North Florida, but there were serious concerns about the impacts of the cats on personal safety, livestock, pets, property rights, hunting, and businesses, and about the way the experimental release was managed

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (FGC) and the Florida Panther Interagency Committee agreed that a study was needed to determine if and how these concerns can be addressed. The study focused on residents in Columbia County because of their experience with the earlier releases. Proponents, opponents and government officials were interviewed and involved in community-wide and work group meetings. The goal was to engage residents in an exploration of the concerns and possible ways to address them. This report contains a listing of issues and impacts, alternative reintroduction scenarios with pros and cons for each and a ranking of the acceptability of each alternative. Several conclusions can be drawn from this study:

1. There were serious concerns about the use of Texas cougars (rather than Florida panthers) in any potential reintroduction program, even in the current genetic restoration project.
2. If reintroduction is considered, the range of social and biological issues outlined in this report should be addressed.
3. Most opponents in the work group object to reintroduction in any form, even with a wide range of measures to address their concerns. If policy makers choose to implement a reintroduction project, the measures identified in this report can be expected to reduce but not eliminate public concerns and opposition.
4. If reintroduction occurs, participation of affected parties, scientists and administrating agencies should be integrated into the project design and management processes.

# Acknowledgements

Primary credit for this report goes to the citizens of Columbia County who took time to be interviewed and to participate in the workshop and work group meetings. In spite of strongly differing views they sought to understand, to seek consensus where possible and to agree to disagree on other points. This report, including participant letters, should help anyone interested in panther management to understand opponents and proponents concerns and attitudes about alternatives. Tom Logan, Julie Jones, Robert C. Belden and James W. McCown provided guidance and support throughout the process. We also want to acknowledge the contribution of Rob Haneisen of the Lake City Reporter who provided consistent coverage of the process.

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# INTRODUCTION

The 1973 Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) calls for the identification and protection of endangered species. The Florida Panther has been identified as an endangered species under the ESA and a number of steps have been taken to protect the animal. Since only one small population of Florida Panthers is left in the wild, that being in South Florida, the reintroduction and establishment of a second population of Florida Panthers is considered by some to be a possible way to help protect the species from extinction.

There is no current project to reintroduce Florida Panthers into North Florida or any areas outside of the current range in South Florida. Reintroduction is an objective in the Florida Panther Recovery Plan, adopted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and supported by the Florida Panther Interagency Committee, made up of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, National Park Service and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Two studies were conducted during 1988-89 and 1992-95, which involved the experimental release of Texas cougars to evaluate the feasibility of reintroducing Florida Panthers in North Florida, which is part of the panther's historic range. The studies showed that the Florida Panther could survive biologically in North Florida, but there were serious concerns about the impacts of the cats on personal safety, livestock, pets, property rights, hunting, and businesses, and about the way the experimental release was managed. Public opinion studies indicate that the majority of people in Florida support protection and recovery of the Florida Panther (Duda and Young 1995, Cramer 1995).

The question of whether or not to reintroduce panthers in new areas is a difficult public policy issue. Who gets to decide: only those potentially affected by the panthers (which is hard to determine), representatives of those in the expected range, program administrators responsible for endangered species protection, the Florida Legislature or Congress? No matter who decides, that decision should consider the best information available regarding the potential impacts of reintroduction.

This study was not a statistical opinion survey or a scientific analysis of impacts. The objectives were:

1. To conduct a study that clarifies human and natural factors in panther reintroduction;
2. To identify and acknowledge the concerns of affected and interested parties;
3. To incorporate expert information into the decision-making process;
4. To engage key interests in recommending if and how panther reintroduction may be done; and
5. To build public consensus on and support for recommendations of the participatory study (there was no assumption that reintroduction will occur)

In particular the study sought to assess whether there was any way to conduct a reintroduction project that could address the concerns of those opposed to reintroduction.

# METHODS

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission engaged the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium as a neutral group to facilitate a study of public acceptability of panther reintroduction. The six-month process, January to June 1998, started with interviews with citizens to better understand their concerns and opinions regarding panther reintroduction. Next, a facilitated public workshop was held March 26 to further explore the concerns of the broader community and identify possible options to address those concerns. At that meeting, a representative work group of 12 was formed which was comprised of individuals with differing perspectives: property owners, residents, outdoor recreation users and government. The work group met three times, April 22, May 20 and June 3 to clarify issues, develop alternatives for consideration by decision-makers. A final facilitated public meeting was held June 25 to review and refine the products of the work group.

The study focused on the citizens of Columbia County because they had experience with the earlier experimental releases. The work group and workshop participants were not intended to statistically represent a specific population: those in the former experimental release area, Columbia County as a whole or the State of Florida. This was a consensus-based group problem-solving process. The goal was to engage the range of interest groups in a more thoughtful consideration of the issues than had been possible in previous media exchanges and surveys. The facilitators suggested structured agendas and ground rules that the participants could modify and agree to. Comments were recorded on flip charts and reports of each session provided the basis for the next session and products included in this final report.

Although a majority of the work group members were opposed to reintroduction, there were also members who were proponents, undecided and agency representatives. The challenge was to get a group with strongly held positions to clarify where they could agree and to agree to disagree on other points. There are a number of possible explanations for why consensus on one alternative was not reached. The primary one is that this is a “not in my backyard (NIMBY)” issue. A NIMBY is an issue where those negatively impacted may even support an idea but feel it is unfair for them to suffer the consequences for something that may benefit the public at large. There were also basic differences in values and beliefs. In particular, there were different perceptions about 1) the degree of risk and extent of impacts from a reintroduction effort; and 2) the public value of protecting large predators. The fact that many of the participants felt mistreated during the Texas Cougar release project made it difficult to establish trusting working relationships.

There was consensus on a list of issues and impacts to be considered. Four alternative scenarios were developed that incorporated a number of measures to address impacts that had been identified. While there was agreement that these were alternatives, there was no consensus on one that would be acceptable to everyone. Participants expressed their opinions by ranking alternatives on a scale of 5 to 1 - whole-heartedly support to opposed. Work group members wanted their opinions recorded so their positions would be clear to those they had been selected to represent and others. The ranking provides decision-makers with a richer understanding of acceptability than simple voting. The inclusion of participant letters in the report allows a rich expression of opinions stated in their own words.

One of the objectives was, “To incorporate expert information into the decision-making process.” This objective was not adequately achieved, primarily due to scheduling conflicts. It

would have been helpful to have the work group agree on information needed to clarify and evaluate impacts and then have experts bring the answers/results to the next meeting. To do this fully could require funded research as well as having experts available to address the group.

Although there was no consensus on a single alternative, most participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be heard and to better understand the other's points of view. Several even commented that there might not have been as significant opposition to the Texas Cougar release if there had been this type of opportunity to understand and influence how the program was implemented. All seemed to agree that those directly affected by a panther program should be involved in its design and management.

## **WORKSHOP AND WORK GROUP PRODUCTS**

Facilitators recorded participant comments on flip charts that were used in preparing meeting reports. The reports were then reviewed and refined at subsequent meetings. The products do not capture everything or exactly what was said but do provide an understanding of what was produced and the degree to which there was consensus on the products. The products include:

1. Panther Genetics Issues
2. Reintroduction Issues and Impacts
3. Alternative Scenarios for Reintroduction
4. Pros and Cons of Alternative Scenarios
5. Acceptability of Alternative Scenarios
6. Participant's Concluding Comments

### **Panther Genetics Issues**

Questions regarding the use of Texas Cougars and genetic restoration were raised continuously during the study. After extensive discussion, the work group generated the following statements but there was not unanimous agreement on any of them:

1. Restoration of historic genetic material through limited inter-crossing with Texas cougars is essential to the survival of the South Florida population because of reproductive and other health problems that are the result of inbreeding in the small, isolated, South Florida population.
2. With controlled genetic restoration the Florida panther will remain unique sub-species and retain its protection as an endangered species under provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
3. Reintroduction may not be necessary if genetic restoration restores the health of the isolated population.

These statements were drawn from workshop discussions. There was no attempt to do a peer reviewed scientific assessment of these opinions. The individual perceptions on the genetics issues seemed to affect the participant's recognition of the need for and acceptability of reintroduction. There was especially strong opposition to reintroduction of non-Florida cats. Opponents also questioned whether Florida panthers would continue to be a unique sub-species

and be considered endangered (there are plenty of Texas cougars).

# Reintroduction Issues and Impacts

The following issues and impacts provide a checklist for decision-makers, staff and others to consider in evaluating and possibly implementing panther reintroduction alternatives. The list may also be useful to those managing the panther population in South Florida and other large predators around the country. This list was developed from input at the initial Issues and Options Community Workshop and refined at subsequent workshops.

## Property Rights

Impact on legal use of real property - do Endangered Species Act restrictions apply? If designated an "experimental population" they don't. Can people be assured that the "experimental" designation will not be changed later?

Limitation of personal use of ones property, e.g. fear to allow children in the woods

Right to use public lands safely

Impacts on land values, e.g. fear of panthers may reduce sales and prices

## Livestock and Pets

Estimated risk to domestic animals.

Cattle

Sheep

Hogs

Horses

Dogs, cats and other pets

Goats, llamas, ratites (alternative livestock)

Exotic hunting animals

Timely, fair compensation for: loss of livestock and pets (personal value), time spent making the claim and punitive damages - with processing by a neutral body and provisions to add determine losses

Efficient procedure for removal of problem panthers

## Public Safety

Estimated risk to people.

Timely and fair compensation for injury and death. Will there be clarification of government responsibilities and liability and insurance or a compensation fund?

Estimated costs from panther related accidents, e.g. frightened horses, damaged cars

Public education on how to minimize risk

Adequacy of food supply (hungry panthers are more dangerous)

Use of wild not captive panthers

Behavioral conditioning of panthers to avoid human contact

Efficient procedure for removal of problem panthers

Public awareness of true location of the panthers

Impacts on personal recreation of locals and tourists

## Hunting, Recreation, and Wildlife Management

Impacts to deer population

Panthers may reduce bobcat and coyote populations

Impacts on hunting leases

Restrictions on hunting activities (where and when)

Estimated risk to hunters and recreational users

Business income related to outdoor activity

**Panther Health and Survival**

- Number of panthers
- Availability of prey
- Adequacy of habitat
- Disease control
- Breeding opportunities
- Genetic diversity
- Danger of human interactions (vehicles and hunters), including potential loss of existing panthers that are introduced
- Humane treatment of panthers (injuries from management, etc.)

**Panther Program Management**

- Public Safety
- Fulfillment of endangered species mission
- Impact on supporting hunting mission
- Impact on agency relationship with the public
  - Impacted property owners
  - Recreational users in the area
  - Panther advocates
- Perceived honesty, fairness, trust and respect of the GFC
- Perceived effectiveness in fulfilling its mission
- Willingness to work with people to address concerns
- Adequacy and acceptance of information needed to make decisions
- Additional staff requirements
  - Monitor location of cats
  - Public safety education and information program
  - Processing compensation claims
  - Removal of dangerous animals
- Cost of land acquisition and/or leases, facilities and management
- Cost of compensation for panther impacts
- Cost of the panther program in relation to other public needs

**Impacts on Others**

- Increase or decrease in tourism
- Economic impact on outdoor related business
- Opportunities for environmental education
- Impacts on other states
- Additional staff for local law enforcement
- Change in ecosystem, predator-prey balances
- Loss of biodiversity, especially of vertebrate species

# Alternative Scenarios for Panther Reintroduction

The process sought to explore if there were alternative ways to address the impacts identified. Input from the initial community workshop and the work group meetings were used to shape the following alternatives.

## A. No reintroduction of Florida panthers into new areas

- The South Florida program continues with efforts to manage and improve the health, habitat and genetic diversity of the population.

## B. Reintroduction of panthers in a large fenced game preserve.

The fenced game preserve was suggested as a way to protect public safety and property rights and maintain a panther population that would be as wild as possible and provide cats that could be interchanged with the South Florida population. Although the costs could be significant, views were expressed that it would be much less than the costs of a broader reintroduction if you include: potential liability and impacts on hunting, property values, business loss and citizen use of public and private lands. It was suggested that to implement this alternative the State could:

- Purchase or lease 20,000 to 200,000 acres. This should support approximately 10 panthers with enhanced feeding. Hardwoods along streams are preferred.
- Install a 10 ft. wire fence with an overhang, topped with an electric wire, plus another wire near the ground on posts.
- Manage the land for panther and prey. Prescribed burning will improve habitat for deer, panther and other species.
- Provide controlled public access and minimize human interaction to maintain the wild nature of the panthers. Existing uses of the land may possibly continue.
- Provide separate territories for males within the preserve and rotate animals in and out of the South Florida population to optimize genetic diversity.
- Lease private lands to keep the properties on the tax rolls and not limit public use of current public lands.

## C. Put panthers in a targeted reintroduction area (multi-county).

This would be similar to the experimental release of Texas Cougars in geographic distribution. It would not necessarily be focused in Columbia County. The Apalachicola National Forest, Elgin Airforce base as well as areas in Georgia, Alabama and North Carolina were mentioned as options. The following are provisions suggested to address the listed impacts:

- Designate a target area (public and/or private, how big and with what characteristics?)
- Introduction of wild, not captive panthers.
- Enhance public land management for panther prey to minimize impact on private lands.
- Limit the size of the panther population to what can be supported by excess prey, to minimize livestock and deer depredation and threats to personal safety.
- Educate the public to minimize risk of panther-human interaction.
- Provide financial aid to prevent losses before they occur. This might include fencing for

vulnerable livestock and other preventive measures.

- Assure rapid removal of problem panthers and ones that leave the target area.
- Pass provisions that classify all reintroduced panthers as experimental populations that are not and will not later be considered endangered species, to assure there will be no restrictions on the use of public or private lands under the Endangered Species Act
- Provide a locally controlled compensation program for loss of livestock and pets including timely fair resolution of disputes. A provision is needed to clarify that the State is liable and can be sued for damages. Damages may include: value of animals, veterinary bills, personal value of pets, estimated value of hard to document claims, property damage resulting from panther caused accidents, legal fees, time spent processing claims and punitive claims.
- Establish an insurance plan for compensation of personal injury and death based on the estimated risk and potential compensation.
- Compensate hunters and hunting lessors. By estimating the number of deer a panther kills per year, the number of deer per acre on a hunting lease and the rent per acre is possible to suggest that a population of 50 panthers would result in a loss of value of approximately \$1,500,000. Compensation could take the form of payments to lessors, and/or grants or assistance to maintain prey base at pre-panther reintroduction levels. It is important to note that hunting lessors and lessees do not legally own deer. They belong to the public. It was argued that even so, they are adversely affected by a public policy and may be eligible for compensation.
- Provide a mechanism for estimating damages and compensating wildlife artists, recreational users and recreation-related businesses for loss of revenue.
- Fund additional local law enforcement officers.

#### **D. Dispersed reintroduction - Small groups of panthers in different areas**

This alternative was generated, in part, in response to the concern that Columbia County should not bear the brunt of impacts for a public purpose people throughout the State are interested in. It also recognizes that larger concentrations of panthers (50+) can reduce prey levels and contribute to greater danger to livestock and the public. Smaller collared groupings could be managed to provide better distribution across the historic range to assure breeding opportunities as needed.

- Institute a reintroduction program that places small numbers of panthers (3-8) in large natural areas throughout their historic range (Southeastern states).
- All animals will be collared and moved as necessary to address genetic breeding and male territory needs and to remove problem animals.
- Institute similar management, compensation and other efforts as for the targeted reintroduction area (Scenario C).

# Pros and Cons of Alternative Scenarios

This chart summarizes how the impacts may relate to the alternatives. The degree of impact will vary depending on the geographical location, size of the program, etc.

## A. No reintroduction of Florida panthers into new areas

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
No risk to personal safety	Increased risk of Fl. panther extinction
No risk to domestic animals	Limits panther's role in natural systems
No impact on hunting stock	Limits compliance with Endangered Species Act
No limits on use of public and private land	

## B. Reintroduction of panthers in a large fenced game preserve.

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
Minimal risk to people and animals	Number of panthers would be limited
Protects panthers in a semi-wild place	Not a totally natural setting
Enhances genetic restoration program	Lease and management costs

## C. Put panthers in a targeted reintroduction area.

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
Restoration of panthers to historic habitats	Risk to personal safety
Reduced risk of FL panther extinction	Risk to domestic animals
Compliance with Endangered Species Act	Impact on hunting stock (deer and hogs)
Maintenance of natural systems	Limits on use of public and private land
No acquisition or lease costs	Costs of management and liability

## D. Dispersed reintroduction - Small groups of panthers in different areas

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
Impacts on any one area are limited	Mgt. would be more difficult and costly
Impacts are distributed more fairly	Needs more breeding intervention

Restoration of panthers to historic habitats  
Reduced risk of FL panther extinction  
Compliance with Endangered Species Act  
Maintenance of natural systems  
No acquisition or lease costs

Risk to personal safety  
Risk to domestic animals  
Impact on hunting stock  
Limits on use of public and private land  
Costs of management and liability

# Acceptability of Alternative Scenarios

Acceptability rankings were done for several reasons: to better understand and address concerns about particular scenarios, to compare the acceptability of the alternatives and to allow participants to record their preferences for the record. It is important to note that there was no attempt to assure that the work group was statistically representative of the prior reintroduction study area, Columbia County or Florida as a whole, or to have a balanced number of people for and against reintroduction. Participants at the initial community workshop selected work group members, two each representing: hunters, property owners, residents, environmental groups, outdoor recreation and government agencies. Formal opinion studies have been done by Cramer (1995) and Duda and Young (1995).

What these rankings show is a more considered evaluation by a group that has discussed the issues than those responding to a typical opinion poll. Most would agree that a majority of the work group was initially opposed to reintroduction. The ranking process helped identify concerns and ways to refine the scenarios. Even with the changes, those in opposition were even firmer in their conviction that there should be no reintroduction in any form; compare the rankings after the first and last work group meetings. Work group members and concluding workshop participants ranked the acceptability of the alternatives using the following scale:

5. Wholeheartedly support
4. Good, but could be better
3. Neutral, it has advantages and disadvantages
2. Poor, serious concerns to be addressed
1. Opposed

## Acceptability Ranking at the End of the First Work Group Meeting April 22

Scenarios \ Acceptability Ranks	5	4	3	2	1	Avg.
A - No reintroduction	7	0	0	1	3	3.64
B - Large fenced preserve	1	1	4	3	0	3.00
C - Targeted reintroduction area	3	1	0	1	6	2.45
D - Smaller groups in different areas	0	1	0	1	9	1.36

## Acceptability Ranking at the End of the Last Work Group Meeting June 3

(The descriptions of the alternatives was refined considerably between the first and last meeting)

	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	
Lys Burden	2	4	3	4	
Michael Carter		5	1	1	1
Lynnda Davis	5	1	1	1	
Dennis Emerson	5	2	1	1	

Karen Howard		1		3		4		4
Keith Lawrence	2		2		5		3	
Donna Marihart	5		1		1		1	
Ann Opgenorth	5		2		1		1	
Ed Rose	5		1		1		3	
Clyde Townsend	5		1		1		1	
Steve Williams		1		2		4		4
Tom Logan (non-voting member)								
Average rank	3.73		1.82		2.09		2.18	

## Acceptability Ranking by the June 25 Community Workshop Participants

After a discussion of the issues, impacts and alternative scenarios, participants were asked to rank the acceptability of the alternatives. The results are broken down by the following zip codes:

- 32025 I - 75 east to the county line and Highway 90 south to the county line
- 32055 North of Highway 90 to the county line, excluding White Springs
- 32096 White Springs

### Zip Code: 32025—Rankings (4 responses)

<i>Alternative Scenarios</i>	5	4	3	2	1	Avg.
A - No reintroduction	3	0	0	0	1	4.00
B - Large Fenced Preserve	0	0	2	0	2	2.00
C - Targeted Reintroduction Area	1	0	0	0	3	1.00
D - Smaller groups in different areas	0	0	1	0	3	1.50

### Zip Code: 32055—Rankings (6 responses)

A - No reintroduction	6	0	0	0	0	5.00
B - Large Fenced Preserve	0	0	2	0	3	1.80
C - Targeted Reintroduction Area	0	0	0	0	5	1.00
D - Smaller groups in different areas	0	0	1	0	4	1.40

### Zip Code: 32096—Rankings (7 responses)

A - No reintroduction	4	0	0	0	3	3.29
B - Large Fenced Preserve	0	1	2	3	0	2.33
C - Targeted Reintroduction Area	1	2	0	0	3	2.67
D - Smaller groups in different areas	2	0	1	0	3	2.67

**Zip Code: Other—Rankings (2 responses)**

A - No reintroduction	1	0	0	0	1	3.00
B - Large Fenced Preserve	0	0	0	0	1	1.00
C - Targeted Reintroduction Area	0	1	0	0	0	4.00
D - Smaller groups in different areas	0	1	0	0	0	4.00

**TOTALS (19 responses)**

A - No reintroduction	14	0	0	0	5	3.95
B - Large Fenced Preserve	0	0	6	3	6	2.00
C - Targeted Reintroduction Area	2	3	0	0	11	2.06
D - Smaller groups in different areas	2	1	3	0	10	2.06

Observations - These results should not be considered statistically representative of the community by interest group, zip code or as a whole because of the low number of responses. They do indicate the thinking of concerned citizens who took the time to attend one or more meetings (more informed views than typical random surveys). No alternative had unanimous support except for the workshop participants who live north of Highway 90, which had much of the direct experience with reintroduction, and were unanimously opposed to reintroduction. It is also helpful to look at the distribution of rankings for each alternative to understand the degree of polarization.

# Participant Concluding Comments

## Work Group Concluding Comments

Participants were asked for and provided the following concluding remarks at the end of the last work group meeting on June 3, 1998:

- I am totally against Reintroduction
- All Texas cats should be removed from Florida.
- Continue efforts to support panthers in South Florida, including fenced areas, leases, and genetic work.
- Before any reintroduction effort is initiated, an area must be found that is totally suitable for panthers (so they will stay there).
- We need to find out if there are FL panthers in Louisiana. This may be a source of genetic material.
- Do not reintroduce panthers in Columbia County because of the bad feelings of residents, partially due to the inadequacy of information provided in the first release.
- The GFC has not been responsible in the past, why should they be trusted now.
- Use of Texas cougars is OK in the Everglades (for genetic restoration).
- Voluntary incentive-based programs are needed for private landowners and with assurances that there will be no restrictions on land use (in South FL).
- Assumption of liability would be an incentive to landowners (in South FL)
- Hold public meetings in the affected areas before any reintroduction; avoid any impression of secrecy.
- Provide better notification of public meetings.
- The Everglades provides a good place to develop the population and address problems.
- Public agencies need to do better in dealing with the public and with wild animals.
- Better responses from public agencies and better information from agencies are needed.

## Suggestions for Decision-Makers from the Final Community Workshop

Participants were asked to consider the following questions raised by the study. Their written and verbal responses are included on the next page (some responses reference the question numbers).

1. To what extent should government protect people, private property, the environment and endangered species, in particular large predators?
2. How should conflicting public purposes be balanced?
3. Where should limited public resources be spent?
4. Who gets to decide, those affected, everyone who votes, or special interests?
5. How can minority interests be protected from the majority at each level of government?  
Are large predators acceptable anywhere?
6. Do panthers have a right to survive in the wild?
7. Will Florida panthers still exist and be an endangered species if they are cross-bred (selectively) with Texas cougars?

## Written responses to the questions from the feedback forms

- Cancel the whole program. We don't need them and we don't want them.
- Private property—use experimental non-essential classification for any reintroduced panther populations. It is absolutely mandatory for a reintroduction program to deal with any problem animals; like the nuisance gator program does, and to provide a deprecation program (compensation) to fund losses—use panther tag program to fund panther programs.
- Listen to those of us who will be affected directly and our rights must be protected before the rights of a government agency. This whole program is a waste of money, particularly since many cats live well in the west. Florida can much better and more safely spend its money on people/children programs.
- Constitutional rights of people must be the first priority of all government agencies—this refers to the property owner's rights. This is a stupid program as Texas still has a bounty on its overpopulation of cougars and these seem to be the same as the South Florida panthers. So why waste the money and destroy the good will of us rural citizens? I strongly oppose a targeted reintroduction area.
- Seek the answer by using science-based data and state and federal law and state regulations.
- As much informed, unemotional dialogue as possible with as much representation as possible. This group seemed like it was mainly composed of disgruntled landowners that needed to vent. More balanced dialogue might be effective.
- (1) This is moot point since we citizens cannot trust our government agencies. (4) Those affected should decide. (7) If the only difference between Florida panthers and Texas cougars are genetic deficiencies which the genetic restoration project is trying to cure, how can they be considered endangered?
- (5) Follow the Constitution. (6) Where they are. (7) No.
- (1) No one should have the right to place large predator on someone else's property. (2) The people that are affected by this conflict should have the final say. (3) On more important issue. (4) The people who are affected. (5) Not in an area with a large population. (6) Yes, but not in areas of population. (7) I don't know.
- People and their private property rights come first. Columbia County is a civilized part of Florida and not a wilderness; the population of Columbia County is now a high-growth area.
- (1) Make decisions based on the wishes of the majority of landowners affected by the location of the cougars. (2) If they are not affected—no say so.
- A valid study with facts would be a good starting point for this entire study/discussion.

## Participant responses to questions at the Concluding Community Workshop

- We are concerned about truthfulness of the GFC. There have been inaccurate articles in Florida Wildlife Magazine. Clear this up before doing anything else.
- We need to acknowledge that the GFC has made efforts to build trust recently.
- GFC influencing children to appreciate panthers is unfair.
- There has been misleading information. It may not have been intentional. The 1995 report has many omissions and misstatements. The report is not fair. It disturbs us. We need accurate information.
- How long will it be before panthers in South Florida are genetically altered enough to move to North Florida? Won't they just put Texas cougars in? Are we to believe them?
- The cost of fencing and potential losses is like introducing a cancer on the public.

- Take the Florida panther to another part of the country. I am still not sure South Florida population is unique subspecies.
- Columbia County shouldn't be made to feel guilty for panther survival.

# Conclusions

The question of whether Florida Panthers should be reintroduced, and if so how, is a very controversial public decision that will not be made by those directly affected. The decision-makers do have a clear responsibility to consider the interests of all citizens who are impacted, other interest groups, the public, the practical constraints of operating a program, and relevant laws. This study was designed to involve those in Columbia County who had personal experience with the experimental releases in 1992 and 1995 to clarify issues and impacts that decision-makers should consider and to offer suggestions for how these can be addressed. The following are summary observations and suggested implications. It is important to note that, while both reintroduction proponents and opponents were involved, the results should not be interpreted as being representative of all citizens in the affected area, Columbia County or the State of Florida.

## **2. There are serious concerns about the use of Texas cougars in any potential reintroduction program and in the genetic restoration project.**

There was general agreement that preservation of the Florida panther was a desirable goal, at least the existing South Florida population. Opponents claimed that there was no justification for putting people and property at risk, especially from an animal that is not on the endangered species list. They also questioned whether the offspring of the Texas cougars in the genetic restoration program should be considered an endangered species. Further explanation and discussion of genetic restoration may contribute to public acceptance of Panther protection.

## **2. If reintroduction is considered, it should address a full range of issues and impacts.**

A major contribution of this study was the identification of the impacts of panther reintroduction on people and property. Any evaluation of potential programs in possible target areas should consider these impacts. Some are easier to measure, like the loss of a cow. Others are more difficult, like the value of a life-long pet or a child. The impact on hunting is complicated by the fact that deer are a public commodity and that hunters have spent large sums to increase deer populations, an investment that may be impacted by panthers. It is also hard to get agreement on the estimates for many of the impacts. Decision-makers need to weigh the estimated direct and indirect costs of reintroduction with the benefits of complying with the Endangered Species Act, maintaining natural bio-diversity and contributing to the survival of the Florida panther. This is a difficult decision.

## **3. Opponents object to reintroduction in any form.**

Those that oppose reintroduction vehemently object because they perceive a serious threat to the use of their property, property values, domestic animals, personal safety, hunting and other outdoor activities. They also expressed serious doubts about the credibility of government programs that would implement reintroduction. Proponents acknowledge these concerns and perceive that the threats of reintroduction are overstated and can be minimized by appropriate design and management of a reintroduction program. The study identified four basic alternatives that incorporated suggestions to minimize impacts. There are elements in each alternative that may be useful in any reintroduction effort. Even with the best-designed program, the opponents still found reintroduction unacceptable. This may indicate that any reintroduction program is likely to be faced with vehement opposition.



#### **4. If reintroduction occurs there should be integrated, facilitated involvement of stakeholders, scientists and administrating agencies in project design and management.**

Serious questions were raised about the accuracy and bias of previous reports and statements regarding panther behavior, genetic restoration, degree of risk, etc. This study did not attempt to repeat formal surveys or scientific. There was also only limited involvement in this study of those with scientific expertise. If reintroduction is considered in the future, it will be helpful to involve stakeholders and scientists in formulating and answering questions so decisions can be made with the best possible information. It is important to acknowledge that analysis can be costly and complete certainty and agreement on the information is unlikely.

Several participants stated that the past actions by the Game and Fish Commission, during the Texas Cougar experimental release, resulted in anger and mistrust. If there is a decision to implement a reintroduction, involving citizens and other institutions in planning and management can enhance program workability and public support. Working in these potentially hostile situations may require extra effort to elicit and address the valid concerns of all parties. Facilitated workshops can help transform hostility into more open and honest communications.

#### **A Contribution to Understanding Public Policy Questions**

The study also identified core questions. There were panther-specific questions. Are these large predators acceptable anywhere? Do panthers have a right to survive in the wild? Will Florida panthers still exist and be an endangered species if they are inter-crossed with Texas cougars? Larger public policy questions that may apply to any reintroduction or other controversial public endeavor, include: to what extent should government protect people, private property, the environment and endangered species, in particular large predators? How should conflicting public purposes be balanced? Where should limited public resources be spent? Who gets to decide, those affected, everyone who votes (in the impacted area, county, state or nation), those with special interests or those with professional/scientific expertise? How can minority interests be protected from the majority at each level of government? The challenge is how to design a decision-making process involving elected and appointed officials, program administrators and affected citizens that will result in publicly acceptable, just outcomes.

The process provided the opportunity for diverse perspectives to be considered. The participants were concerned citizens who shared their time and insights so this difficult public issue could be better understood. In summary, this report clarifies reintroduction issues and options for panther program decision-makers, managers, and others involved in the reintroduction of large predators.

## **APPENDICES**

**A. Florida Panther Reintroduction Study Work Group**

**B. Study Reference Materials: Letters, Newspaper Articles, Community Surveys, Reports, etc.**

**C. Letters from Individuals and Organizations Involved in the Study Process**

# Appendix A

## Florida Panther Reintroduction Study Work Group

The participants in the initial Issues and Options Community Workshop were asked to divide themselves into six interest groups. The interest groups went to different parts of the room and selected two representatives to participate in a work group. Members of the work group they selected are listed here:

### Work Group Members

#### Interest Groups

#### Representatives

Hunters

Ed Rose  
Clyde Townsend

Property Owners

Michael Carter  
Dennis Emerson

Residents

Ann Opgenorth  
Lynnda Davis

Environmental Groups

Karen Howard  
Steve Williams

Outdoor Recreation

Donna Marihart  
Lys Burden

Government Agencies  
(non-voting)

Tom Logan and/or Julie Jones FGFWFC  
Keith Lawrence, Osceola National Forest

# Appendix B

## Study Reference Materials

The following reference materials are from those interviewed in the initial assessment, work group participants, letters received, and research by the facilitators. Copies can be viewed at the Lake City Public Library or the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

### Reports from Community Workshops and Work Group Meetings

- Panther Reintroduction Issues and Options Community Workshop, March 26, 1998, Summary Report
- Reintroduction Work Group Meeting 1, April 22, 1998, Summary Report
- Reintroduction Work Group Meeting 1, May 20, 1998, Summary Report
- Reintroduction Work Group Meeting 1, June 3, 1998, Summary Report
- Panther Reintroduction Concluding Community Workshop, June 25, 1998, Summary Report

### Opinion Surveys

- Duda, M. D. and K. C. Young. 1995. Responsive Management. Floridians' Knowledge, Opinions and Attitudes toward Panther Habitat and Panther-Related Issues. Public Opinion Survey Results Report.
- Marihart, D. and A. Opgenorth. 1998. Survey of property owners in an area near White Springs.
- ----- 1998. Survey of customers at a North Columbia County Feed Store

### Reports on Panthers

- Alvarez, K. 1994. The Florida Panther Recovery Program, An Organizational Failure of the Endangered Species Act., in Endangered Species Recovery, Island Press.
- Belden, R. C. and J. W. McCown. 1996. Florida Panther Reintroduction Feasibility Study. Florida Fresh Water Fish and Game Commission.
- Cramer, P. 1995. The Northeast Florida Panther Education Program. Final Report to the Florida Advisory Council on Environmental Education.
- Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and American Farmland Trust. 1995. A Landowner's Strategy for Protecting Florida Panther Habitat on Private Lands in South Florida. A Project Report.
- Florida Stewardship Foundation. 1997. The Florida Panther and Private Lands. An Economic Analysis: The Cost of the Landowners' "Conceptual Plan" Compared to Other Conservation Alternatives.

### Newspaper and Magazine Articles and World Wide Web Information

- State panther needs our help to stay alive. Lake City Reporter, June 5, 1998.
- Panther work group ends as divided as it started. Rob Haneisen, Lake City Reporter, June, 1998.
- Not In My Back Yard...Or On My Front Porch. Lynnda Davis, North Florida

ADVOCATE, January, 1997.

- Mountain Lions are killing sheep in North Fork Valley.
- Range of Panthers in Louisiana?
- Resolving conflicts of panther reintroduction. Rob Haneisen, Lake City Reporter, April 22, 1998.
- Meet the panther. Rob Haneisen, Lake City Reporter, April 23, 1998.
- Panther opponents still asking why. Rob Haneisen, Lake City Reporter, May 21, 1998.
- Panther progress. Rob Haneisen, Lake City Reporter, March 13, 1998.
- Panther needs good stewards. Steve Williams, Lake City Reporter, April 24, 1998.
- Big Cats, Big Controversy. Steve La Rue, Union Tribune, March 6, 1996
- First Cougars...Now Red Wolves...What's Next? Audrey Callahan, The Columbia Citizen ADVOCATE, June 1995.
- C.A.R.L... Cougars...Collusion? Lynnda M. Davis, The Columbia Citizen ADVOCATE, May, 1995.
- As The Wilderness Creeps Back In. A reflective note on the "Green" destruction of American Society. MLUR, September 1997.
- Florida Panther Society Website:
  - A Brief History of Florida Panthers.
  - Florida Panther Recovery Efforts
  - Florida Panther Reintroduction Questions & Answers
  - Panther Reference Material
  - The Florida Panther's Place in the Ecosystem
  - A Few Thoughts
- Mountain Lions Don't Kill Humans - And Pigs Can Fly! Audrey Callahan, North Florida ADVOCATE, September 1997.
- Cougar In Area. Pat Cardinal, North Florida ADVOCATE, September 1997.
- Here Kitty, Kitty Kitty. Pat Cardinal, North Florida ADVOCATE, October 1997.
- Cougar Capture Not a Pleasant Experience. Audrey Callahan, The Columbia Citizen ADVOCATE, May 1995.
- Cougar-restocking program poses peril to citizens. Chris Beldon
- Debate surrounds "Waldo Cat". Bruce Ritchie, The Gainesville Sun, August 27, 1995.
- Wandering cat looking for love. Associated Press, Florida Times Union, September 5, 1994.
- Hunting club joins in effort to save cougars. Cindy Swirko, The Gainesville Sun, January 10, 1994.
- The Cats of Osceola. S. Williams, OSVNV, Lake City Reporter, November 11, 1993.
- The Cougar and the Controversy. Amy Hession, The High Springs Herald, January, 19, 1995.
- Big cats are back. Cindy Swirko, The Gainesville Sun.
- Levy cougar is shot. Karen Voyles, The Gainesville Sun.
- Cats, people clash in program. Derek L. Kinner, Florida Times Union, January 2, 1994.
- Panther program not viable. Audrey Callahan, Lake City Report, March 6, 1995.
- Outdoor Life, January 1995 Issue, Ray Rychnovsky.
- Hunt club adopts panther. S. Williams, OSVNV, Lake City Reporter.
- Parents concerned about Texas cougars. Jeff Thomas, The Jasper News, December 8, 1994.
- A cougar conundrum. Bruce Ritchie, The Gainesville Sun, January 12, 1995.
- A plea for understanding. S. Williams, OSVNV, The Gainesville Sun, December 2, 1993.

- Ready for a cat fight. Bruce Ritchie, The Gainesville Sun, January 21, 1995.
- Residents protest cougars. Bruce Ritchie, The Gainesville Sun, January 22, 1995.
- Problem is Texas Cougars, Not Florida Panthers. Lynnda M. Davis.
- In the Fight Between Landowner and Panther, the Panther is Losing. Christina Binkley, The Wall Street Journal, May 10, 1995.
- Cougar Experiment Nears Completion. News Release, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, March 24, 1995.
- Opinion shift on Endangered Species Act is new opportunity.
- Panthers - Facts and Fiction. Jerry Geraci, Citizens for Constitutional Property Rights, Lee County Chapter. Volume 1, Issue 2. August, 1993.
- Save the Florida panther. Mike Thomas, Florida magazine, March 1994.
- 1994 Supplement to Florida Statutes, page 705 & 711.
- Cougars Claw Their Way Into Controversy with Lion Attacks on Deadly Upswing, Fear - and Debate Sify. Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee, August 1, 1994.
- Mountain lions don't stalk people. True or false? John Seidensticker with Susan Lumpkin.
- She gave her life for her son. Alberta Report, September 2, 1996.
- Another Cougar Killed. Newsday.
- Man Says He Killed Cougar that Charged Family. The Columbian
- "Help! Cougar!" Good Housekeeping, April 1992.
- Cowboy Kills Mountain Lion. Electronic Library, November 12, 1997.
- Near Attack by Cougar Reported. Electronic Library.
- Mountain Lion may have killed park hiker. Sandra Diesle
- Cougar Attacks On The Rise. Outdoor Life, September 1993.
- Cougar charges child at outdoor park, is killed. Ed Zieralski, The San Diego Union-Tribune.
- Mountain lion mauls woman testing water on Ute reservation. Gary Gerhardt, Rocky Mountain News.
- Prowling mountain lion shot. Robert Dorroh, Union Democrat, Sonoma, CA, December 5, 1994.
- Cougar made her feel 'like we were its prey' David Harpster, San Diego (California) Union, September 7, 1993.
- Cougars Hunting in Packs. www.iro.umontrea.../cruz/infos/news001.txt
- A Broken Law That Needs Fixing. Progressive Farmer, March 1994.
- Summary of Written Comments Received on the 1993 Report.
- Close Encounter of the Local Kind. A listing of cougar encounters.
- Cougar Encounters - International, National, and Local. Not In My Back Yard newsletter. Date Unknown.
- Cartoon *Fuller* from the Gainesville Sun regarding Florida panther and Not In My Back Yard.
- Cartoon *Fuller* from The Gainesville Sun regarding panthers in North Florida.

## Letters

- Letter from Dennis B. Jordan to Mr. Dale Williams of Columbia County Florida, regarding Florida panther recovery plan.
- Letter from Ted L. Guerry, Sr. to Governor Lawton Chiles regarding cougar/panther experiment.
- Letter from Wayne J. Turner regarding cougar encounter.

- Letter from Hank Jones regarding group Not In My Back Yard.
- Letter from Ray Giles to Col. Larry Martin, Director of NE District FL Game & Freshwater Fish Commission, regarding Texas cougar encounter.
- Letter from Mr. Robert Halcom to Mr. Larry Martin, Director of NE District FL Game & Freshwater Fish Commission, regarding "Cougar Rally."
- Letter from Robert L. Ross to Dr. Allan L. Egbert, Executive Director, FL Game & Freshwater Fish Commission, regarding cougar encounter.
- Letter from Sally Bishop regarding a Texas cougar encounter.
- Letter from Amy B. Guerry to Governor Lawton Chiles regarding cougar experiment.
- Letter from Joseph M. Espenship to Governor Lawton Chiles regarding cougar/panther experiment.
- Letter from Darlean Stephens regarding Texas cougars in Florida.
- Letter from John W. Burns regarding cougars in Florida.
- Letter from Woods Gun Repair & Sales to Dr. Allan L. regarding Texas cougar plan.
- Letter from a member of Cone Pasture regarding cougar population in area.
- Letter from Gene Cherry to Col. Larry Martin, Director, FL Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, regarding "Cougar Rally."

# Appendix C

## Letters from Individuals and Organizations Involved in the Study Process

The report captures the substance of the discussions in the workshops and work group meetings. Participants were requested to submit letters for inclusion with the report to clarify their views and feelings about reintroduction and the process. Letters were received from:

Doris M. Carter,

Michael Carter

Patricia Cramer

Lynnda Davis

Dennis Emerson

Manley Fuller

Karen C. Howard

Donna Marihart

Ann Opgenorth

Clyde Townsend

Steve Williams