

## Florida Panther Recovery Plan Raises Identity Issues

**A government recovery plan to protect the Florida panther raises questions about its subspecies classification.**

A revised draft recovery plan for the Florida panther, issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in January, has reopened the issue of the animals identity, according to a recent article in the Washington Post.

The plan proposes to export the endangered subspecies to sites in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama. Roughly 80 Florida panthers are left in southern Florida, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which said that reintroducing them in these states may increase the population.

However, the plan is being met with some resistance from officials in other states, where many farmers are concerned about attacks on livestock, the newspaper reported. It also raises the question whether or not the Florida panther is identical to the cougar in western North America.

I'm not even sure at this point that a Florida panther, as a subspecies, exists, said David Goad, deputy director of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented a genetic restoration plan. This plan crossbred Texas cougars and Florida panthers in an effort to prevent inbreeding within the Florida panthers population, and to increase the overall number of cats. It has been considered a success, the newspaper reported. The number of cats has more than doubled.

After the implementation, however, a team of scientists recommended that the two be considered the same subspecies. They had found that they were genetically similar after taking genetic samples from 300 cats in North and South America.

There was nothing unique to the Florida panthers genetic markers, Melanie Culver, a geneticist for the U.S. Geological Survey and the lead author of the study, told the Washington Post. At a subspecies level, they are no different from other North American cougars.

Others believe that the Florida panther should remain as its own subspecies. Stephen Williams, founder of the Florida Panther Society, said that the Florida panthers characteristics such as its reddish color, the shape of its nasal passages and its shorter and rougher hair set them apart from cougars.

David Maehr, an associate professor of conservation biology at the University of Kentucky, considers himself a purist and thinks the genetic tools have not yet been discovered to show a Florida panther is a Florida panther.

The situation with the crossbreeding spiraled out of control, Maehr told the newspaper. We may well be losing certain attributes of what a Florida panther is.

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