

When animals stalk humans, hunters should shoot back!

By Mary Zeiss Stange

"It's crazy: When you want to hike public land in California, the Fish and Game folks give you a pamphlet warning you to be on the lookout for poison oak on backcountry trails, as if that's the biggest danger out there. The pamphlet doesn't even mention mountain lions." So a California acquaintance, and fellow hunter, remarked to me shortly after the January cougar attacks that left one bicyclist dead and another severely injured.

"If we could still hunt those big cats," he added, "we wouldn't have this problem."

He might have a point. Wildlife officials estimate that today there are 4,000 to 6,000 cougars in California, a tenfold increase since hunting them in that state was stopped in the early 1970s. Not only are lion sightings up dramatically, but lion attacks on livestock, pets and humans have risen sharply. An average of one human has been attacked per year since 1990; three have died.

Steve Torres, an environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Game, told the San Francisco Chronicle that, with "humans and lions interfacing," attacks such as the one that took the life of Mark Reynolds Jan. 8 are bound to continue occurring.

Reynolds, 35, an amateur mountain-bike racer, was attacked while biking alone in Orange County's Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park. His partially eaten body was discovered several hours later near the site of a second lion attack that same day. That attack left 30-year-old mountain biker Anne Hjelle severely injured. A young male mountain lion subsequently was shot by wildlife officials, who were able to determine that the animal was responsible for both attacks.

Might an open season on mountain lions help prevent such awful encounters?

A key reason for reintroducing regulated hunting is that it would reestablish in predators a fear of humans. That's a fear they clearly have lost if they've gotten to the point of seeing people as prey, or at least as non-competitors in the food chain. California mountain lions — also called cougars, pumas and panthers — have been off-limits to hunters since 1971, when a plunging cat population led then-governor Ronald Reagan to sign a moratorium. In 1990, after a lengthy media campaign pitting animal-rights activists against hunter-conservationists, California voters passed Proposition 117, the California Wildlife Protection Act, which permanently banned lion hunting.

Yet, in spite of the growing problem of lions "interfacing" with humans, pets and livestock, any effort to reintroduce the hunting of cougars touches off friction between animal protectionists and representatives of the hunting community, such as Safari Club International and the National Rifle Association. Those two groups tried to restore hunting in 1996 through another public referendum, following the deaths of two female hikers in separate attacks. That initiative failed. But, with a cougar population that appears increasingly difficult to control, it may be time for another.

Long assumed to be denizens of rugged wilderness areas, cougars, faced with ever-increasing human development encroaching on their habitat, today are likely to be lurking alarmingly close to home. The nearest dwellings were a mere half-mile from the "wilderness" trail where the latest attacks occurred. And Walter Boyce, a professor at the University of California-Davis' Wildlife

Health Center, has put radio collars on several mountain lions and tracked them roaming backyards of San Diego's suburbs at night, foraging for food.

New Jersey has had to confront a strikingly similar situation when it comes to black bears. Bear hunting was banned in the Garden State 33 years ago, when the bear population numbered about 100. Today, the population is thought to be as high as 3,000, and the past few years have witnessed a steep upswing in bear-human encounters.

Last year, at least 58 bears broke into houses in New Jersey, and the state Division of Fish and Wildlife received more than 1,300 complaints about problem bears, including one from a hiker who was mugged by a bruin that stole his trail mix, and another from the parents of a two-year-old swatted by a bear that ambled into their yard. While these encounters only resulted in minor injuries, in New York last year a bear knocked a baby out of her stroller and killed her.

As in California, the primary reason for increased bear-human interaction is the encroachment of humans on bear habitat. According to New Jersey Fish and Wildlife Director Marty McHugh, "There are no deep-woods bears in the state. These bears in the deeper woods areas are ranging out to feed in the suburbs and on the farms."

Last fall, New Jersey issued more than 5,000 black bear permits to hunters. In December, 328 bears were killed during the six-day hunting season, which New Jersey wildlife officials regarded as a success.

Animal rights activists called the hunt a massacre. Some people objected that hunters did not effectively isolate the "nuisance" bears most in need of being removed. Others promoted a contraception program to reduce numbers "naturally."

What these critics all tended to miss was the fact that, as a strategy for controlling animal-human interaction, hunting ultimately has less to do with killing than with instilling fear in animals that have begun to see humans as prey. Animals that are hunted are much more wary of their human predators and less willing to risk contact with them.

Would a similar strategy work to decrease cougar attacks in California? The current system there allows wildlife officials to exterminate problem animals — but, as the latest attacks demonstrate, this can occur only after animals have become problems, often with tragic outcomes. And experts have suggested that the cougar that carried out those attacks, like most of New Jersey's "nuisance" bears, was probably perfectly normal.

Hunting would not completely offset the behavioral problems caused by human overdevelopment, but it is an ancient, efficient, way to restore humans to our place in the natural scheme of things. If, in the process, it reminds our feline co-predators that it is not a good idea to put us on their menu, then it is at least (no pun intended) worth a shot.

Mary Zeiss Stange, author of *Woman the Hunter*, teaches at Skidmore College. She also is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

BCWF ALERT
John B Holdstock
BC Wildlife Federation
Kelowna, BC

jbholdstock@shaw.ca
<http://www.bcwf.bc.ca/>

