



Mountain Lion Behavior

The Latest Research

For the past three years, researchers at the University of California at Davis have been conducting research called the Southern California Puma Project. According to lead researcher Walter Boyce, “Mountain lions inspire a range of emotions including fear, awe, anger and wonder. This study is designed to provide objective information so that people can make decisions based on facts rather than emotions.”

This ongoing study, which costs approximately \$200,000 per year, is being conducted on twenty lions in San Diego County, about 35 miles east of San Diego. Each lion has been fitted with a Global Positioning System collar. By tracking these lions, researchers hope to understand if and how mountain lion behavior changes as they get used to the presence of humans. This information may, in turn, teach them how humans living in or visiting areas populated with lions should behave so as to increase public safety and reduce lion attacks.

This research is challenging several long-held assumptions about mountain lion behavior. For example, game wardens have long operated on the assumption that once a lion eats domestic livestock, they will develop an appetite for that and must, therefore, be destroyed. The study has shown that if the domestic livestock are more effectively controlled, lions will return to their natural prey.

The assumption that lions are wary of the presence of humans and that so-called “normal” lions will avoid areas of human activity completely has also been effectively defeated. The GPS collars have shown that, during the day, lions will sleep as close as 100 yards to hiking trails and buildings. During the night, lions will actually make use of the trail system and will come quite close to buildings. In short, the study has shown that lions have a much higher level of adaptability to increased human activity than expected.

That said, California Game & Fish biologist Doug Updike makes the following point: “We are not on the menu. If a lion had any desire to catch and eat people, we would see literally hundreds of people dying every day.”

Lt. Bob Turner, a California game warden who, over the past twenty years, has killed dozens of lions has changed his attitude towards lions as a result of this research. “Most people are plain stupid,” he said. “Close to 50 percent of the lions killed could be avoided if people could be responsible.”