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To: <[dyoung@southfloridaaudubon.org](mailto:dyoung@southfloridaaudubon.org)>

Subject: Florida panthers dropping like flies in 2012 - take action now!

Dear Friends,

After a year which saw a record 24 Florida panthers killed by auto collision, intraspecific aggression (panther on panther fights to the death), illegal shootings, wildfire, and "unknown causes", 2012 has gotten off to a rough start for Florida's state animal - and the only large cat which remains east of the Mississippi River. In just the first 2 weeks of the year, a total of 4 Florida panthers have died - two on highways, one in a territorial fight with another panther just outside a new housing development, and one by apparent infection. For a species which resides on just 5 percent of its former range (estimated to be shrinking by 1 percent per year) and has a maximum population of 160 individuals - this is not a good sign of things to come.

You can help. The new director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Dan Ashe, is currently touring south Florida along with Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar. Positive announcements are being made on banning the import of invasive snake species, supporting Everglades restoration, and investing hundreds of millions of dollars to protect ranch lands in central Florida. With Director Ashe's attention firmly on the Sunshine State, now is a perfect time to ask him to take the steps necessary to the recovery of Florida's great cat. As always - individual emails will carry much more weight than a form letter.

Director Ashe's email is: [dan\\_ashe@fws.gov](mailto:dan_ashe@fws.gov)

There is an underscore \_ between dan and ashe.

Here are two suggestions from South Florida Wildlands Association for you to consider sending to Director Ashe.

1. Designate "critical habitat" for the panther immediately.

In February of 2010, in response to a petition by a coalition of environmental organizations, FWS chose to deny the Florida panther "critical habitat" protection under the Endangered Species Act - in spite of numerous documented benefits to species recovery. Thus, while the panther itself is currently protected, its habitat is not. In their denial, the service cited both the need to have "cooperative" relationships with area landowners as well as a "technicality" - the panther was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1973 before the requirement to provide critical habitat designation for any endangered animal was mandated by a 1978 amendment to the Act.

Just since the 2010 decision, ten new development projects have been approved by FWS in panther

habitat (since 1984, FWS has approved 143 individual projects - a near perfect record). The ten recent projects include the typical mosaic of usages now common throughout south Florida: expanded agricultural operations; a waste to energy plant; a golf course community; a parking lot for off-road vehicles; a road widening project; and a limestone mine.

In each case, after acknowledging “adverse impacts to the Florida panther and Florida panther habitat”, the service has concluded, “Critical habitat has not been designated for the Florida panther, and therefore, will not be affected”.

For a look at what one of these projects actually looks like on the ground, this video was shot 2 weeks ago at mile marker 51 of Interstate 75. It shows the massive new parking lot being constructed in the heart of primary panther habitat in the Big Cypress National Preserve Addition Lands. A popular hiking trail now lies buried somewhere beneath it. When completed, the project will provide parking for some of the 650 recreational motor vehicles which FWS has also approved in this highly sensitive area.

<http://m1e.net/c?107293660-.1WrXh59JyL12%407155690-dCDDzhMs27WRs>

2. Move immediately to expand the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.

As mentioned above, Director Ashe will be making an announcement today to protect 150,000 acres of ranch lands in central Florida through a combination of land purchases and conservation easements. He will be requesting a 700 million dollar authorization from congress to accomplish that.

While we appreciate the intent of the "Headwaters of the Everglades" project, South Florida Wildlands Association (SFWA) believes that, given the current plight of the panther, a re-prioritization is absolutely essential. At least a half dozen properties essential to the panther - and totaling approximately the same acreage as would be included in the Headwaters project - have been on the books for a decade as unfinished “Florida Forever” projects (the State of Florida’s conservation land acquisition program). These include a property to the north of the Big Cypress Addition Lands (bought up by Florida Power and Light just this past June and now slated to become the biggest fossil fuel power plant in the country - the Hendry County Clean Energy Center - if we and our allies are unsuccessful in stopping the project). Another piece of privately owned land borders the Caloosahatchee River and has been identified as the last piece of undeveloped property which panthers (so far only males) use to leave the confines of south Florida. While SFWA and other environmental organizations are working hard to bring this key corridor under conservation protection, the “for sale” sign remains.

Time is of the essence. These lands and others adjacent to them are on the Florida Growth Machine’s chopping block now. Allowing them to be developed will likely deal a fatal blow to the panther’s chances of recovery. If protected they would form a completely contiguous corridor of conservation lands and habitat which would stretch from the Caloosahatchee River to the southern tip of Everglades National Park. They have been extensively studied for their conservation importance and, with the sole

exception of the land recently purchased by Florida Power and Light, have owners willing to provide protection without added development (we are still hoping Florida Power and Light will come around on this as well). This is not an opportunity we want to miss.

Please send an email to Director Ashe now. Ask him to reconsider the decision of his agency and designate critical habitat for the panther immediately. And ask him to use the power of the federal government to acquire lands necessary to the survival of Florida's great cat by expanding the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge with already identified, essential acquisitions. Once again, Director Ashe's email address is: [dan\\_ashe@fws.gov](mailto:dan_ashe@fws.gov)

The National Park Service's own comments on the construction of the parking lot and motorized recreational access point described above are well worth a read. Written in 1994, they are a fitting summary of what we (and the panther) stand to lose:

"The odds for the long-term survival of the Florida panther in the wild are not good. The-human population in the region continues to increase, resulting in urban growth and expansion of the regional highway network into former panther habitat. The demand and use of panther habitat for outdoor recreation has also increased and will continue to do so...Any action that decreases the wilderness qualities of the Everglades region impacts this species. The existing threats to the panther are interrelated and cannot be separated. The primary threat to the Florida panther has been human encroachment into panther habitat."

Eloquent words. Now is the time to follow them and make true protection of Florida panther habitat - along with the hundreds of species of plants and animals which share it - a reality.

Best regards,  
Matt Schwartz  
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P.S. Our Facebook page continues to be a good place to follow our work. "Like" us at:

<http://m1e.net/c?107293660-skn9FDyTzsAnM%407155691-jQ65fcZWLDbhk>

P.P.S. Donations are always appreciated and help us tremendously in carrying out this important work. A big thanks to those who supported us in 2011.

<http://m1e.net/c?107293660-xL.L7k6/ekjU.%407155692-MFD3pXQ2P7I72>

P.P.P.S A high resolution (3.8 MB) area map with conservation properties acquired or proposed can be found on the South Florida Restoration Taskforce website. Available for download below.

<http://m1e.net/c?107293660-wwWgtPsovcDEU%407155693-TMM4KS20/DxiE>