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Cougar Response Guide

INTRODUCTION

An effective wildlife management strategy must balance the needs of wildlife with those of the public. Protection of life and property is a priority, along with considering what is best for the cougar population.

This guide provides a standard approach in deciding cougar management responses. It is a resource for government staff who must act in situations of conflict where clear, concise and consistent direction is needed. The guide supports the province's Cougar Management Plan (2012) and is the result of collaboration among biologists, enforcement officers, and problem wildlife specialists. Except in national parks, this guide will apply to specific events involving cougars throughout the province, including lands within provincial parks and protected areas. The guide is reviewed annually and revised as required.

The guide also shows Albertans how human/cougar incidents will be handled. Staff will use the guide as a reference to communicate with stakeholders and the public about managing human/cougar conflicts and to promote public and community support for cougar conservation.

PREVENTATIVE ACTION

Preventative action is the first response in most situations where a cougar has not presented an immediate threat to humans.

Preventative actions include:

- Assess situation/monitor;
- Close area to public access;
- Educate by providing information on wildlife behaviour and presence;
- Remove or order removal of attractants;
- Allow access by groups only;
- Erect electric fences around camps and/or attractants;
- Limit access through timing restrictions;
- Allow hard-sided accommodation only (no tents or tent trailers);
- Move pets and livestock to shelter and/or increase animal husbandry actions;
- Use of deterrents or scaring devices.

Often, preventative actions may be sufficient to prevent future incidents. For example, if a cougar is frequenting rural residential areas in search of food such as pets or livestock, providing increased securement for pets and small livestock such as housing them inside a secure structure at night, will effectively limit predation encounters. Preventative actions are often the appropriate first response.

USING THE GUIDE

If preventative actions have proven insufficient and control actions are deemed necessary, this guide will be used to determine the appropriate response. The guide relies on the results of an incident investigation along with assessing the cougar's age/sex classification and behaviour to enable staff to determine an appropriate response option for a cougar conflict incident. Cougars have known behavioural patterns that, when combined with location, time and other factors, may indicate an incident is probable. It is unlikely however that the guide anticipates all possible situations. Where situations do not fall cleanly within the guide, staff will make decisions that most closely follow the guide.

INVESTIGATION

Reports of human/cougar conflict or property damage will be investigated by trained government staff. The aim of the investigation is to collect evidence, including witness reports and physical evidence that will provide an accurate account of the cougar's actions, as well as any human activity involved.

CLASSIFICATION

Three main factors are used to help determine an appropriate response to human/cougar conflict or property damage. They include the age, sex, and family status of the animal (female with kittens, orphan, etc.), the animal's behaviour and location of the incident.

An experienced Fish and Wildlife Officer or, in Provincial Parks, a Conservation Officer or Ecologist, will make these determinations based on evidence collected during an investigation,

and may call upon other technical experts to assist with the evaluation. The subsequent response will be based on these factors as outlined in the guide.

The following age-based descriptions are used to classify the type of cougar involved in an incident:

- Kitten: < 12 months
- Orphan Kitten: < 12 months not accompanied by adult
- Young: A kitten, yearling or sub-adult that is accompanying the mother
- Adult: > 12 months

A cougar is further classified based on its behaviour:

- **Habituated:** A habituated cougar shows little or no perceived reaction to people. This is an animal whose presence could be interpreted as, or lead to a public safety risk. Cougars that frequent developed areas or areas of high human use such as urban areas immediately adjacent to natural escape habitat, rural residences, campgrounds, or ranch yards while in search of natural foods may be habituated. Preventative actions should be used on cougars classified as habituated.
- **Food-conditioned:** A cougar that feeds on unnatural foods and frequents or remains in human-frequented areas.
- **Depredation:** A depredation cougar has attacked, killed, or is an immediate threat to a pet or livestock animal.
- **Offender:** An offender cougar is one that presents an apparent threat to human safety or has had contact with a human after being provoked (i.e. the cougar's actions were the result of, or response to, actions by the human). An offender cougar will not always require capture, for example if the cougar's response was defensive in nature and the contact was not prolonged. The location of the incident will be a major component in the decision.
- **Predator:** A predator cougar is one that has killed a human and either fed upon or concealed the body, or has stalked, pursued, chased or ambushed a human (unprovoked) resulting in cougar/human contact, whether or not the victim was killed or injured. If the predator cougar has young, then all members of the family group will be classified as predator.

RESPONSE

If a cougar needs to be captured by trap, snare, immobilization or hound pursuit it will be done in accordance with the established departmental standards and procedures. The following chart identifies the types of responses based on the age and behaviour of the cougar.

All euthanasia will follow the Canada Council on Animal Care Guidelines.

COUGAR RESPONSE CHART

PREVENTATIVE ACTION WILL BE THE INITIAL RESPONSE BEFORE THE DECISION IS MADE TO CAPTURE (see above)
THE RESPONSE CHART RELATES TO COUGARS CAPTURED AS THE RESULT OF A CONFLICT INCIDENT

BEHAVIOUR RANK	HABITUATED / FOOD CONDITIONED	DEPREDATION	OFFENDER/ PREDATOR
HISTORY RANK	1	1	1
COUGAR TYPE			
All Age Classes	EU	EU	EU
RESPONSE TYPE			
EU- Euthanasia			

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