



Los Angeles, CA
Wednesday, March 19, 2008

Wildlife path may pave way to survival

By Dana Bartholomew

There's just enough wilderness left in Southern California for a mountain lion to stalk a wily badger from the southern Sierra Nevada into Baja California.

But if habitat linking millions of acres of parkland gets gobbled up by development, conservationists say the Southland's rich wildlife legacy could be lost.

"Without linkages between existing parks, national forests and other public lands, many native species could be threatened or disappear entirely," said Ray Sauvajot, chief of planning, science and resource management for the National Park Service in Thousand Oaks.

A consortium of 15 wildlife agencies released on Wednesday a comprehensive plan, seven years in the making, to establish those linkages throughout Southern California.

The plan, produced by South Coast Wildlife, maps more than 1 million acres of wildlife corridors and establishes a long-term strategy to safeguard native plants and animals.

Movement is essential to wildlife survival for gene sharing and for repopulating habitats, the group says. By protecting the travel routes for everything from mountain lions to butterflies, many endangered animal and plant species can be saved.

"Now, all 15 linkages from the Tehachapis down into Baja are complete," said Kristeen Penrod, conservation director for South Coast Wildlands, a Los Angeles conservation planning agency.

"The whole purpose of this is to maintain existing conservation investments - billions (of dollars) in state parks - so that our grandchildren and great grandchildren can see them in perpetuity. It's really about the animals being able to have healthy populations and gene pools."

The 67-page report, "South Coast Missing Linkages Project: A Wildland Network for the South Coast Ecoregion," is designed to provide a blueprint for governments to deter development of key wildlife habitats.

The South Coast Linkages Project now serves as a model for similar plans in Northern California, Arizona and Colorado.

The Southern California wildlife network is comprised of roughly 19.4million acres, of which 94percent are protected, according to the report.

Of that, about 1.4million acres serve as links between national forests and other public lands - a little more than half of which is at risk of being developed.

The proposed 555-acre Las Lomas development in the rolling hills between Los Angeles and Santa Clarita was to be built on land reserved for one of those links. It was shot down Wednesday by the Los Angeles City Council.

"In Southern California, we don't have a lot of time to conserve these linkages," Penrod said. "Probably about a decade."

Linkage advocates hope to map the rest of California and to draw in more partner agencies in order to develop a public consciousness to protect vital open space.

"Connecting wildlands requires connecting a lot of people," said Penrod, a founder of the linkage movement. "We need to speak in one voice to protect these linkages."

In June 2006, South Coast Wildlands published a 213-page report outlining wildlife corridors around Los Angeles.

The region, considered one of the world's 25 most important "hot spots" for biological diversity, contains 400 threatened and endangered plant and animal species.

For wildlife, the acquisition of Ahmanson Ranch by the state in 2003 helped connect the Simi Hills to the Santa Monica Mountains.

In west Simi Valley, mountain lions have been tracked crossing an underpass and tunnel to the 118 Freeway connecting the Simi Hills to the Arroyo Simi.

The report found mountain lion movements from the Los Padres National Forest near Lake Piru across the Santa Clara River into the Santa Susana Mountains, then across the 118 around Rocky Peak Road and into the Simi Hills west of the San Fernando Valley.

Other corridors include the Agoura Hills-Calabasas area, across the Ventura Freeway around Las Virgenes-Malibu Canyon and into the Santa Monica Mountains around Malibu Creek State Park.

Sauvajot said such agencies as Caltrans have made recent headway to protect wildlife migrations by creating access under busy freeways. Plans call for new wildlife tunnels beneath the 101 Freeway at Liberty Canyon Road between Calabasas and Agoura Hills.

Wildlife fencing is now being added along Highway 23 between Moorpark and Thousand Oaks, which guides animals to safe undercrossings.

"It's the only plan of its kind," said Sauvajot, based in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. "Because of the level of development and fragmentation of habitat, the species that still exist and this area's survival depend on the corridors and open spaces that are still out there.

"This is a blueprint for wildlife survival."