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Status of Pet Mountain Lions (*Puma concolor*) in Arkansas

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The practice of keeping mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) and other large and exotic animals as pets has been increasing in popularity in the United States, and prices for these animals have dropped in recent years (Green, Animal Underworld: Inside America's black market for rare and exotic species, Public Affairs, P. 95-97 and 120-121, 1997). Though the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service does require permits for the sale of wild animals, regulation of the care and living conditions of mountain lions kept as personal pets is the responsibility of state and local governments.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) has authority over all wildlife in Arkansas, including individuals living in captivity, and has regulated private ownership through provisions in the AGFC Code of Regulations. However, it is difficult to trace the regulatory history of mountain lions in Arkansas because of incomplete AGFC records. In 1937 the AGFC required permits for possession of wild birds and animals outside of an open hunting season, but this may not have been applied to pet mountain lions since apparently there was not a general closed season on nongame animals until 1967. However, 1957 AGFC regulations did not include mountain lions on a list of approved wildlife pets, and another section of the 1957 code prohibited possession of predatory animals. From 1980-1987 possession of mountain lions was prohibited though an exception was made for those having proof of legal ownership. This exception was eliminated in January 1987 but was restored in March 1990 with the caveat that ownership must be in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations (AGFC regulations, 1937-2001).

Two different mail surveys were used to determine the status of pet mountain lions in Arkansas in 2000. The first, sent to 155 AGFC wildlife officers, requested that officers report the total number of dangerous wild animal pets, including mountain lions, present in their county and the known escapes and injuries caused by wildlife pets from 1997-2000. In counties where more than one wildlife officer was present, they were asked to consult with each other and submit only one report for the county. Wildlife officer survey data were supplemented with other AGFC records and newspaper accounts of escapes and human injuries caused by pet mountain lions from 1990-2000. The second survey, sent to all 308 incorporated Arkansas towns, asked whether or not the towns had any regulations relating to the keeping of animals and requested that each town's officials return copies of applicable ordinances.

Wildlife officers returned surveys for 66 counties (88%) and reported at least 101-151 pet mountain lions in 20 Arkansas counties, four of which had more than five pet mountain lions. The respondent from Benton County estimated there were 50-100 pet mountain lions in the county based on prior complaints and said that he knew of at least 10 pet mountain lions within 10 miles of his home. Escapes or intentional releases of pet mountain lions are not uncommon; there was at least one incident each year from 1997-1999, three in 2000, and two in the first three months of 2001. Three of the five incidents of human injury recorded from 1990-2000 occurred during an escape or subsequent recapture attempt. Poor caging that did not fully prevent contact between the animal and the public allowed the other two injuries to occur. Since there are no requirements for reporting escapes or injuries to the AGFC, it is likely that there are many more undocumented incidents than reported herein.

A total of 192 towns (62%) returned the town ordinance survey, 42 (22%) of which have wildlife pet ordinances. These ordinances vary in the severity of restriction and animals covered; 17 towns prohibit all wildlife pets, 15 only prohibit dangerous wildlife pets, four allow wildlife pets under permit, three prohibit most wildlife pets, one prohibits only dangerous reptiles, and one prohibits only lions. Nine towns also prohibit the keeping of exotic animals in addition to other wildlife pet restrictions while one town only specifically prohibits exotic animals. Most of these ordinances were enacted in recent years, increasing from at least six in 1989 to 42 in 2000.

Arkansas is not unique in facing issues relating to captive mountain lions; in 1993 there were an estimated 300-500 pet mountain lions in Florida, and in the late 1970s a New York official estimated that 5-10 mountain lions escape or are released by private owners in that state every year (McBride et al., Proc. Ann. Conf. Southeast Assoc. of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, 47:394-402, 1993; East, American Forests, 85:21, 54-59, 1979). This study demonstrates that pet mountain lion ownership is widespread in Arkansas and that citizen concern expressed by a 700% increase in town wildlife pet ordinances since 1990 is warranted due to the number of escapes and human injuries caused by these pets.