Cougars and Bears in the Cross Hairs

West Coast residents have demonstrated their compassion in recent years by supporting ballot initiatives to ban cruel and unsporting hunting practices. In 1990, California voters approved Proposition 117—which banned the trophy hunting of cougars—and thereby extended a hunting prohibition that had been in place since 1971. In 1994, Oregon voters approved Measure 18, banning hound hunting of black bears and cougars and bear baiting.

These victories stung hunters, who have long coveted the heads and hides of bears and cougars as prized trophies. So hunters have struck back. In Oregon, state legislators acting on behalf of the hunting lobby pushed forth more than 10 bills to repeal, damage, or delay Measure 18 in 1995. Fortunately, all the bills failed.

Fresh Attacks by the Hunting Lobby

Now, the hunting lobby in Oregon has launched an initiative of its own to not only repeal Measure 18, but also provide the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission with exclusive authority to set wildlife policy in the state. The commission has long been dominated by hunters. And the hunting lobby wants to solidify its interests by concentrating all the power in the hands of the Commission’s seven political appointees. However, they must gather 72,000 signatures of registered voters by July to qualify the measure for the November 1996 ballot.

In California, the hunters’ counterattack has been similarly furious. Recently, the Legislature approved a bill to refer the hunting issue back to the ballot. Proposition 197 is a cleverly worded measure that purports to protect the public from cougars, but is really just a formula for restoring the trophy hunting of the animals in California (see the sidebar on pages 2 and 3 for facts about cougars and public safety). A public vote is scheduled for March 26, 1996.

In Washington state, The HSUS is...
Cougars and Public Safety

In northern California, on December 3, 1995, a turkey hunter barely escaped a jaunt in the woods with his life. A cougar mauled him while a second lion looked on. In an effort to parry the attack, the hunter shot the animal, who had sunk his teeth into his foot. He shot and drove the cats way, but also shot himself in the foot. The hunter survived the attack.

It sounds like a harrowing story, played out in headlines in major newspapers throughout California. One problem, though. Subsequent investigation by the Department of Fish and Game and by the surgeon who treated the hunter failed to turn up any evidence to support the story. While officials stopped short of calling it a hoax, it may be that the hunter shot himself in the foot and tried not only to cover up his embarrassing act, but also to heap some bad publicity on California’s much-maligned cougars.

During the Measure 18 fight in Oregon, a hunter in that state also apparently concocted a lion attack story. Not a shred of evidence turned up to support his contention.

Such stories raise serious questions not only about the veracity of alleged cougar attacks, but also about the reliability of data from state fish and game agencies that purport to show an increase in sightings and encounters between people and cougars.

Indeed, cougars are powerful animals and do have the ability to harm people. In California in 1994, lions were responsible for two human deaths—the first fatalities in that state be permitted. The HSUS urges all citizens to vote during these elections. If you would like to become involved, please contact us at the WCRG of The HSUS and we will involve you in the campaigns.

California Bear Workshop.

California Ballot: Proposition 197
Vote Date: March 26, 1996
Content: Under the guise of public safety, the measure would allow the state to sanction trophy hunting of mountain lions.

HSUS position: VOTE "NO" on Proposition 197


Content: Bans bear baiting, bans mountain hunting of bears, cougars, and bobcats.


... If enough signatures are gathered to qualify the measure for the November ballot, vote "NO" in November.

Washington


Content: Bans bear baiting, bans mountain hunting of bears, cougars, and bobcats.


Hounding Them to Death

There is a strong perception that houndsmen abuse the rules of fair chase routines. The issue of radio-collars on dogs, sequential packs of dogs to keep fresh hounds on the bear, keeping bears tired for days while getting a hunter to the site, unmarked treecuts—all of these results in a tarnished image. The perception is the reality.


In 1995, a Utah jury convicted a group of hunting guides for chasing cougars with dogs, illegally roping and choking the animals, and then releasing them into areas where out-of-state clients could shoot them in a guaranteed kill situation. For these "canned" hunts, they charged their clients thousands of dollars per cat.

Through the Utah hunt was particularly atrocious, it is not unlike many lawful hounding practices that routinely occur throughout the West.

Bear Baiting: Anything But Sporting

State fish and wildlife agencies explore citizens not to feed wildlife—and for good reasons. Animals habituated to human food sources are likely to raid garbage cans, be labeled as "nuisances," and then killed.

The no-feeding admonition applies to all citizens—except bear baiters, that is. Washington allows hunters to dump rotting meats, fruits, vegetables, honey, and grease in barrels or simply in heaps to attract bears. The bears gorge on these foods, and return frequently to the bait sites. The hunters—often concealed behind blinds or hiding in trees—will then wait for the trophy specimens of their choice to come along and shoot the feeding animals.

Bear baiting is simply un sporting. The baying of deer, elk, or pronghorn antelope is prohibited in western states. The HSUS believes the same standards should apply to bears.

Colorado and Oregon have recently banned bear baiting by public vote. Only 10 states—including Washington—allow this archaic and un sporting practice.
By Eric Sakach, Director of The HSUS West Coast Regional Office

**Vote “NO” on 197—Your Vote is Crucial!**

This March, California voters will once again be asked to decide whether cougars should be protected from trophy hunters. It will be a battle of fact versus emotional appeal to be sure, because the proponents of Proposition 197 have pulled the biggest emotional weapon out of their political arsenal—that of public safety. I’d like to share with you some of the facts.

Just six years ago, the majority of Californians voted to continue a ban on the hunting of mountain lions, a ban that has been in place since a moratorium was established in 1971. Then, because the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) caved into pressures from hunters, the matter of whether trophy hunting of the big cats should be allowed was placed on the ballot in 1990. Proposition 117 was a decisive victory for California’s cougar lovers over the wants of trophy hunters, and it should have put the matter to rest.

Sadly, as a result of two human deaths attributed to the big cats in 1994, the issue has risen again. Under the guise of “public safety,” the DFG has determined that it needs the help of trophy hunters to “manage” mountain lions. Certainly, while these fatal encounters are tragic for the victims and their families, and my heart goes out to them, we should not lose sight of the fact that cougar attacks on people are extremely rare.

There have been only 6 confirmed attacks on people since 1990, and the 2 deaths were the first in California since 1909. In fact, there have been only 13 fatal cougar attacks in all of North America in the last 100 years. To put the figures in perspective, know that for every fatal cougar attack in the last 100 years, over 300 people have been killed by bees. Additionally, many Californians have moved into what was, and still is, prime cougar habitat. It isn’t surprising that more people are reporting sightings as they move into areas where cougars live. And when pets and livestock live in these same areas, it shouldn’t be at all surprising when they attract unwanted attention from predators, especially if left unguarded outdoors. It’s important to note that the law already permits the killing of any cougar who is perceived as a threat to livestock or public safety.

The truth is, the “threat to public safety” argument just doesn’t add up. Proposition 197 is, in reality, a deceptive measure that will overturn the 1990 voter-approved ban on trophy hunting of cougars. The majority of people in California have already made it clear that they value the lives of cougars and other large predators over trophies. Don’t be swayed now by deceptive tactics.

**Reflect for a moment…**

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