

2020

To Be a Guide in the Mountains, Among the Pumas

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Recommended Citation

Derakshan, Mithra (2020) "To Be a Guide in the Mountains, Among the Pumas," *Humboldt Geographic*: Vol. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/humboldtgeographic/vol1/iss1/23>

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TO BE A GUIDE IN THE MOUNTAINS, AMONG THE PUMAS

mithra derakshan (2018)

After moving to Topanga in mid-September 2019, I started working for Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area as a Park Guide on October 28, 2019. As a native Angelino I was extremely excited to work for the Park Service in my hometown. Shortly thereafter, on November 8, 2019, the park and the county of Los Angeles experienced the largest wildfire in its recorded history, the Woolsey fire. The fire jumped two major highways, the 101 and the Pacific Coast Highway in less than seven hours. In the final accounting damage was inflicted on more than 96,000 acres of the 150,000-acre recreation area. Within the final containment lines, 1,500 structures were damaged, 88 percent of federal lands were affected, three lives were lost and an incalculable amount of emotional damage was done as well.

Let's just say I had a rough start...

Yet through these extreme circumstances I learned how to overcome obstacles and focus on the important mission of the Park Service: preserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of current and future generations.

This National Park unit is unique for countless reasons. I could spend all day sharing about why I think it is one of the coolest places on Earth. It is the largest area that protects and preserves the extremely rare Mediterranean ecosystem. With the Mediterranean ecosystem having a climate of hot dry summers and cool wet winters, it is an ideal place for human population and so these regions of the world tend to be some of the most populated, creating some unique issues in managing this large urban park.



Sherry Ferber, author of P22: The Journey, dropped by the visitor center. Ferber's dedication to the animal is visible in the mountain lion tattoo on her right bicep.

Within the recreation area there are over 60 different organizations attempting to manage and conserve the land, along with many private landowners. As California Representative Brad Sherman stated in 2001, "This park is at the fringes of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, with over 33 million visits to the beaches and mountains every year." One out of 17 Americans, roughly half of all Californians, lives within an hour's drive of this place, where the mountains meet the sea. You can hike, mountain bike,



Left: My first puma hike with 15 visitors guided to the top of Inspiration Point at King Gillette Ranch.
 Right: Fresh puma track found after a light rain at King Gillette Ranch (photos courtesy of author).

‘I put on the NPS uniform and head into the park knowing that what I do for work does not feel like work at all.

take a scenic drive, surf, fish, rock climb, horseback ride or search for rare birds all in one day. This park is also considered a biodiversity hotspot and protects many endemic and threatened species.

Among these threatened species is Los Angeles’ very own local population of California mountain lions, *Puma concolor*. The California mountain lion, or cougar or puma (this mammal has over 40 different common names just in North America) is not low in number in the entire state of California. Estimates suggest there may be anywhere between six thousand and eight thousand of these big cats in California alone. This animal’s range spans from the Canadian Yukon to the southern Andes in South America and is the widest of any large wild terrestrial mammal in the Western hemisphere. Yet, the local population of cougars in the park is struggling to survive in this highly urbanized and fragmented landscape.

Wildlife biologists from the National Park Service have studied over 70 mountain lions in the park and surrounding areas since 2002. Through studies, that include the use of GPS radio collars, wildlife cameras throughout the park, and field data collection, researchers have been able to identify some of the cats’ key struggles. As of today, there are six

adult pumas affixed with GPS collars, and biologists believe the region can sustain anywhere from 10-15 sub adult/adult mountain lions. One of the biggest issues is that the local population is trapped on an “island of habitat,” unable to disperse to find their own home range because they are surrounded on all sides by large barriers of development, mainly large highways. This creates low genetic diversity within the population, and a high amount of intraspecific conflict: mountain lions killing each other over territory. Most adult/sub-adult males do not make it past the age of three, though the natural lifespan of wild mountain lions is ten years. These mountain lions also face the threat of being hit by cars when attempting to disperse. They are also negatively affected by second generation anticoagulant rodenticides, or rat poison. In the study, 21 out of 22 mountain lions tested positive for up to six different types of rat poison, with two passing away in the last six months from rodenticides poisoning.

One of the long-term solutions for some of these serious issues is a proposed wildlife crossing on the I01 freeway near the Liberty Canyon area. NPS wildlife biologists believe this will allow new mountain lions to join this population and add their

unique genetic material, while also allowing mountain lions to disperse from the recreation area to northern open spaces and natural areas. The proposed wildlife crossing will be the largest one in the world, crossing over ten lanes of one of the busiest highways in the nation. Many non-profit organizations are also attempting to push for a ban on second generation rat poisons through the California AB1788 bill, but are facing opposition from pest control lobbyists.

I was so lucky to have the amazing experience of being able to interview two of the biologists who have been working on this study since its inception, and they outlined the most important issues the mountain lions are facing. Through this interview, hours of research, attending community forums, and speaking with local conservation groups and residents, I have created my own program to convey the information to the public visiting the park. My program is a 3.5-mile hike through Zuma Canyon in Malibu titled “Pumas at Zuma.” I share the information that I organized into a formal National Park Service program with visitors of all ages and backgrounds. I do a bit of facilitated dialogue, pair and share, and questioning of the audience to keep the audience engaged. I also display props of the GPS collars, wildlife cameras, puma tracks, puma scat, and laminated photos of the proposed wildlife crossing and famous pumas.

Through this work I hope to give visitors the information to understand and care about this precious resource, and hopefully one day care for this resource. It is the most gratifying feeling when I put on the NPS uniform and head into the park knowing that what I do for work does not feel like work at all.



The world-famous Hollywood mountain lion in Griffith Park, named P-22 because he is the twenty-second puma in the study (photo by Steve Winter of National Geographic, used with permission).



Sandstone Peak after the Woolsey Fire. This is what the view looked like on the drive to first day at work guide at the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (photo by author).

MITHRA SAYS: “I help visitors from all over the world understand the unique natural and cultural treasures of the region. I always wanted to work for the Park Service, and I wouldn’t have been able to do it without Humboldt Geography. HSU Geography professors connected me to an internship at Redwood National Park during my first semester, and the skills I learned during this time—endurance, commitment, teamwork—are ones integral to my work today. HSU Geography helped me believe in myself and accomplish my dreams.”