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Guest Opinion: Combined effort boosts panthers

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By Larry Williams

Gov. Rick Scott recently signed a proclamation declaring March 15 as “Save The Florida Panther Day.”

Those of us in Florida’s conservation community wholeheartedly applaud and appreciate the governor for calling attention to the plight of this big beautiful cat — our state’s official animal.

Very few Floridians have seen their own state animal in the wild or otherwise. That’s because there are so few left, they’re very stealthy and few are in captivity.

Nevertheless, back in 1982 students chose the seldom seen cat as Florida’s official animal. They recognized that Florida panthers are an indelible part of this state’s impressive wildlife heritage. That’s somewhat surprising because in the early 1980s there were less than 30 left in the world — with their only breeding population confined to Southwest Florida, many suffering genetic abnormalities.

Thanks to efforts led by our counterparts at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, through an initiative called “The Florida Panther Project,” these magnificent felines were rescued from the edge of extinction. In 1995, eight female Texas cougars were relocated to Southwest Florida to restore genetic variability to the population. The genetic restoration was successful and the number of panthers tripled in 10 years. Today, there are believed to be 100-160 in Southwest Florida.

Most of that rebound can be traced to the genetic restoration program. In addition, federal and state conservation lands, such as the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and Picayune State Forest were established within the historic range of Florida panthers in Southwest Florida where these cats have a much better chance at survival.

Even though the population has grown to more than 100, this species is still listed as “endangered” and faces a very uncertain future. We’re losing too many Florida panthers to vehicle strikes and panthers killing panthers because the areas they’re confined to in Southwest Florida aren’t big enough for the expanding population.

Those of us at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are working with partners to find solutions such as establishing wildlife underpasses, movement corridors and conservation easements. Our Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team is striving to identify a comprehensive, yet practical and affordable strategy for keeping Florida panthers on the path to recovery in Southwest Florida and beyond.

The Recovery Team consists of members representing the USFWS, FWC, National Park Service, Florida Defenders of Wildlife and private landowners.

Our team is drawing upon many experts to develop detailed plans and methods to accomplish the activities most needed to achieve the recovery goals identified in the Florida Panther Recovery Plan. This is all being done in the spirit of the governor's profound words in the proclamation: "WHEREAS, it is proper and fitting for all Floridians to pause and reflect on the plight of the Florida panther and the task of preserving this rare component of Florida's diverse natural resources as a legacy to generations of Floridians yet to come."

As the governor advocated, we need to do everything possible to save the Florida panther and with strong support from the state, concerned citizens, nongovernmental organizations and other stakeholders I believe we will.

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