

Rapid City Journal

[South Dakota] GF&P staff seeks increased kill on female lions

By Kevin Woster, Journal staff | Thursday, May 07, 2009

CUSTER -- State Game, Fish & Parks Department biologists are recommending that hunters in the next Black Hills mountain lion season be allowed to kill up to 20 female lions, five more than the current limit of 15.

The GF&P biological staff will make that recommendation Thursday, May 7, to the GF&P Commission during the second day of its May meeting in Custer State Park. The commission will then decide whether to include the increase in its official lion-season proposal. The commission won't take action on the lion season until its July 1 meeting in Pierre, after public hearing. State biologists and a South Dakota State University wildlife researcher told commissioners Wednesday that the lion population in the Black Hills can sustain a higher kill on breeding-age female lions. Hunters killed the maximum of 15 female lions during the 2009 season earlier this year, along with 11 male lions. The season allowed a kill of 35 lions or 15 females, whichever came first.

Fourteen of the 15 female lions killed this year were considered to be of breeding age. They represented 14 percent of the estimated population of about 100 breeding-age female lions in the Black Hills, SDSU wildlife professor Jonathan Jenks said. Research indicates that lions can sustain a 20 percent kill on breeding-age females without damaging the population, Jenks said.

Jenks said several years of hunting seasons and additional use of radio collars to track lion movement have given biologists a better idea of how many lions are in the Hills and how the population is doing. GF&P estimates the Black Hills lion population at between 220 and 280. After years of increasing, the population appears to have stabilized, he said. "There is no indication that the population is growing anymore," Jenks said.

Even so, some hunters in the Black Hills believe there are too many lions and that they are killing too many elk, deer and other big game. More than 500 hunters signed petitions recently asking the GF&P Commission to increase the bag limit on lions during the season.

Ginger Fouck of Keystone spoke for the increase Wednesday during an open-microphone session before the commission. She said lions should be managed more like deer and other game species, rather than receiving so much special attention. "Mountain lions should be treated like animals, and they should be hunted like animals. They shouldn't be treated like humans," Fouck said. Tim Goodwin, who lives near Sheridan Lake, supported the expanded lion kill. Goodwin said he had bloody evidence of the impacts of lions in pictures he took of a pregnant doe killed by a lion this week in his yard. "We really enjoy the mountain lion season," Goodwin said. We'd like to see the season extended and numbers increased."

More people spoke Wednesday in opposition to increasing the lion kill, however. They included Sharon Seneczko, a veterinarian from Custer, who said it would be premature to increase the kill on female lions without the data to assure that it wouldn't damage the population. With a lion population that has stabilized, it would be wise to "leave well enough alone," she said. "For the sake of a healthy ecosystem, it may be that human predators may have to share with feline predators more than they have in the past," Seneczko said.

Lead veterinarian Tom Huhnerkoch said it would be a "knee-jerk" reaction to conclude that lions are the main cause of reduced numbers of big-game animals. Studies show that deep snow and severe winter weather is more likely to cause such declines, he said. "I know it's not the cougar causing the biggest problem," he said.

Gray Gardner of Pringle opposed the increase and questioned whether sport hunting for lions is really sport at all. "It's not fair. If a hunter wants to talk about being a sport hunter, then the hunter ought to go in with a stick. That would be fair," Gardner said.

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