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By Ishani Ganguli

NOTEBOOK

Mountain lion scientist for hire



COURTESY OF RICK HOPKINS **Wildlife biologist
Rick Hopkins**

When Vicki Long visited California's Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority to find out what it was doing to protect the mountain lion, her favorite cat, from land development, she decided the answer was "not enough." And while she had read every study she could get her hands on as part of her life-long fascination with the mountain lion, also known as the cougar - Long helped gather nearly 700,000 signatures for a California proposition in 1990 that banned trophy hunting of the species - she soon realized she needed to bring in an expert with hard evidence to advocate for the cause.

After several calls, Long found Rick Hopkins, a wildlife biologist with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, and 30 years of experience working with mountain lions. "He was just right for what we needed," she says.

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According to Hopkins, owner of the ecological consulting firm Live Oak Associates in San Jose, Long is a unique client, the only one "that's just a private citizen wanting to see a conservation program put together for a species." The firm usually develops restoration projects for public and private clients, including government agencies, school districts, and land developers.

So on a scorching August afternoon in 2004, Long hired a private plane so that she and Hopkins could survey the mountain lion territory they would try to save. Once the aerial view provided "a real sense of how things are truly connected" in Riverside County, Hopkins and his collaborators, including Brad McRae at UC-Santa Barbara, set out to understand the territory.

The landscape suitability model they created, which incorporates features such as topography, vegetation, and density of road traffic, and ranks the value of these features to mountain lion well-being, identifies core habitat areas capable of sustaining the mountain lions and corridors they could use to travel between mountain ranges. "In the past, researchers have often focused on identifying one specific corridor between two areas," explains Chris Papouchis, conservation biologist at the Mountain Lion Foundation. "But what they're finding is, what you really need is multiple corridors in order to ensure this connectivity between the core areas."

The dynamic model can simulate what impact future land development projects might have on mountain lions in the long term, thus helping developers to mitigate damage and officials to reduce conflicts between mountain lions and humans. Hopkins has now started to present his findings to county officials, in the hope that the model will aid them in long-term planning and help educate local residents about respecting, not fearing, their feline neighbors. Already, he has used the model to recommend against a proposed quarry project that would interfere with a critical mountain lion corridor.

Long "can't think of a better thing to do to spend my money on. I could go to Nordstrom, I could buy jewelry," she says. "But this helps me sleep better at night." Through her organization, DandiLion, Long educates people about mountain lions and sells t-shirts and her own paintings of the animal. She says she goes everywhere from Beverly Hills to local fairs to talk to people about mountain lions. Like her favorite species, "I have a big territory," she jokes.

Although Long is "strong-willed" about mountain lions, she's "one of the easiest clients I have to work with," Hopkins says.

"She is so trusting of the directions we suggest to her. She doesn't meddle with what is our area of expertise."

Hopkins isn't the only expert she has called upon to help her cause. When "there was a big hoopla in the paper saying a mountain lion had attacked a horse, she hired a vet to go say, 'that's not a mountain lion attack,'" recalls Lynn Sadler, president and CEO of the Sacramento-based Mountain Lion Foundation, who recommended Hopkins to her.

Despite living in the mountains, Long has yet to see a mountain lion in the wild, but she says visits to "the girls" in the zoo keep her motivated. "When she sees a behavior that she knows is not furthering the conservation of mountain lions, she goes out and tells those responsible. If she can't tell ... she hires a scientist to help her. You can't get in her way," Sadler says.

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