

Director's **Message**

We're on the path...



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There are less than 100 wild panthers in Florida right now – and that number represents a huge success story for an animal that many thought would be extinct by the year 2000.



We didn't know it almost 50 years ago when we were running wild on the barrier islands off Daytona, but we were living through the loss and change of much of Florida's natural landscape. My sense of joyful interaction with nature, developed throughout my boyhood days, has been the driving force that keeps me working to conserve our native habitats.

A recent e-mail from a grade school buddy, Dale, reminded me how hard it will be to do that.

Dale told me friends of his had sighted a large animal in Flagler County; they were sure it was a panther. He wanted to know if I thought it could be a panther that far north. Maybe, but it would be extremely rare, I answered. Then three weeks later a male Florida panther was killed on I-95 in Flagler. I guess his friends knew what they had seen. What a lousy confirmation.

Panthers were once fairly common throughout the southeastern part of the United States, but today all that remains of their habitat is a small section of South Florida. And it is shrinking.

Male panthers need a home range of more than 100,000 acres. That's for one male only, which is why we will see outcast male panthers roaming farther and farther north as they try to establish their territories. Precious little, if any, of this kind of contiguous suitable habitat exists in Florida anymore. And, I would suspect, none of us is prepared for the panther to be an immediate neighbor, wandering the suburbs.

There are less than 100 wild panthers in Florida right now – and that number represents a huge success story for an animal that many thought would be extinct by the year 2000. In my mind, the panther has become a symbol: if we find ways to keep this animal from extinction, we will be on the path to keeping other more-common species common. In fact, this is the goal of the Florida Wildlife Legacy Initiative. We need you as a partner. **FW**



MARK LOTZ