

# The Malibu Times

## NEWS

### Report details new wildlife linkage designs

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The wildlife linkages are essential in maintaining healthy gene pools and protecting wildlife from human encroachment, according to biologists.

By Melonie Magruder / Special to The Malibu Time

In a landmark conservation plan to safeguard wildlife corridors, detailed in a recent report from the conservation planning organization South Coast Wildlands, linkage designs for about 60 different species of animals have been identified, and best potential routes have been developed.

Wildlife corridors, or linkages, are critical components of wildlife habitat, literally pathways for local fauna to use for migration or to expand their hunting territories despite man-made barriers, such as fencing or freeways.

The report, titled the "South Coast Missing Linkages Project: A Wildland Network for the South Coast Ecoregion," is designed to provide new linkages for wildlife and protect those existing within national parks and forests in a region where human activity has effectively cut one species population off from another.

"Wildlife usually needs broad areas to establish territory," Cynthia Reyes, director of Marine Mammal Response of the California Wildlife Center, said. "Barriers like Highway 101 inhibit animals' ability to disburse themselves."

The solution, according to the report, is to enhance and multiply corridors for the animals' usage, so they may travel under (or over) freeways or other barriers from, for example, the San Gabriel Mountains to the Santa Monica Mountains.

Accordingly, South Coast Wildlands is working with a coalition of partners, from the California State Department of Parks to The Nature Conservancy, to prioritize and design landscape linkages from the Southern Sierra Nevada to Baja, California. The Santa Monica-Sierra Madre connection is one of the few coastal-to-inland connections remaining in the south coast ecoregion.

Ron Kosinski is a deputy with the environmental planning department of Caltrans, the agency responsible for constructing or revamping corridors.

"We are consulting right now with specialty biologists on the size, length and lighting issues of a tunnel," Kosinski said, speaking of a specific site at Liberty Canyon and Highway 101. "It's very technical if you want to optimize potential use. Then our engineer has to figure out construction costs. I figure we'll begin construction in 2011."

Kosinski said state agencies now take into consideration the importance of wildlife linkages in new freeway construction and that crossings are feasible for both underpasses and overpasses.

"Right now, there are also crossings on [the] 118 [freeway] at Alamos Canyon and Rocky Peak, and we're working with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy to keep them open," he said.

"There are very few places left around here where animals can cross under the freeway or around housing development," Seth Riley, a wildlife ecologist for the National Parks Service, said. "You need to have natural habitat right up to the crossings on both sides or animals are intimidated. So we want to see crossings that provide the shrubbery, lighting and natural, animal-friendly look they will use."

Ecological "connectivity" is vital to maintaining healthy gene pools and protecting wildlife from human encroachment, according to biologists.

"We have hundreds of reports of animals being killed by cars," Reyes said. "It is documented that animals will use corridors if they're available. Around here, that means mountain lions, mule deer, bobcats, rabbits, coyotes, even ground squirrels."

Michael Harris is a filmmaker preparing a documentary on the plight of area mountain lions and has been working closely with National Parks Service to track local populations.

"I saw what was happening with mountain lions as sort of a microcosm of what's happening in the country with nature versus human encroachment," Harris said. "They're a symbol of our vanishing wilderness. The population of Santa Monica Mountains-area mountain lions has diminished so much that National Parks wasn't even sure there were any left."

In fact, the National Parks Service has been tracking mountain lion populations in the Santa Monica Mountains for several years now. "Since 2004, we've followed two tagged mountain lions and their four babies, as well as two others," Riley explained. "The father ended up killing the mother and, later, one of the male offspring. The others disbursed, but there's just not enough space to maintain a healthy mountain lion population without access to other hunting grounds."

Male mountain lions require up to 100 square miles of territory to hunt.

"Not being able to spread out could have [a] significant long-term effect on a small mountain lion population," Riley continued, speaking of the deleterious effect of inbreeding over generations.

Meanwhile, local wildlife advocates keep a collective eye on restricted animal populations.

Mollie Hogan, director of The Nature of Wildworks Wildlife Center, which offers wildlife educational outreach programs to the public, said, "Mountain lions are extremely shy and, if they live around here, it's difficult for them to roam elsewhere. There's an underpass in Agoura but it's not inviting to mountain lions. Their habitat seems to get smaller and smaller."

Harris hopes his documentary will awaken people to the profound affect human activity has on local wildlife species. "We must learn to balance the needs of humans with nature," he said. "After all, mountain lions are the true natives here."

More information on the South Coast Missing Linkages Project can be found online at [www.scwildlands.org](http://www.scwildlands.org)

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