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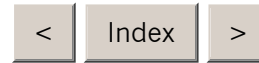
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Development imperils state's wildlife corridors, study finds

59% of migration pathways in danger

LOS ANGELES -- Development severely threatens 59 percent of California's wildlife corridors, the natural pathways traveled by the state's native species, a study released Monday found.

The 79-page study by a coalition of environmental and government groups, identified 232 migration corridors used by the state's mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles.

A majority of the routes are threatened by human activity. A single highway, dam or subdivision can choke off the links between areas that have already been preserved. A full 14 percent of the corridors identified in the survey already have been erased by development.

Corridors are vital for the long-term survival of species such as Chinook salmon, bighorn sheep and bald eagles, scientists said. In California, many of those animals live on isolated preserves hemmed in by development.

"Wildlife corridors are an essential component of any conservation strategy on the basis that the natural habitats have been fragmented," said Paul Spitler, executive director of the California Wilderness Coalition.

The Davis-based group cosponsored the study with The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Geological Survey, Center for the Reproduction of Endangered Species and the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The hope is to influence state conservation policy, which has traditionally focused on core habitat areas but not on the links that join them.

"Missing Linkages: Restoring Connectivity to the California Landscape" was the result of a meeting of 160 scientists at the San Diego Zoo in November.

The survey -- said to be the first to cover an entire state -- underscores the importance of corridors in preserving genetic diversity and the

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sustainability of wildlife populations, scientists said.

"They foster or maintain genetic flow -- that is when animals move from one small population to another, they take their genes with them and thereby increase the genetic diversity of the population at large," said Barbara Dugelby, a Texas wildlands ecologist who studies the issue.

"It's true for everything from cougars down to butterflies."

M.A. Sanjayan, director of conservation science for The Nature Conservancy, said the situation is most dire in Southern California, where 80 percent of the corridors are threatened by encroaching development.

"Movement corridors are of critical importance if we are to maintain the pieces we already have in the long run. Otherwise, these islands of habitat will continue to erode in biodiversity," Sanjayan said.

Preserving the corridors can be as simple and cheap as tucking a culvert under a highway project or as complicated and expensive as securing and preserving land slated for development, Spitler said.

The latter has been the case with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which for more than a decade has sought to stitch together and preserve a contiguous swath of open space stretching roughly 80 miles from downtown Los Angeles to Point Mugu in Ventura County.

To accomplish its task, which it aims to complete by 2010, it has had to gain rights to some of the last undeveloped parcels of land in the nation's second-largest city.

"There is no question about it, preserving these linkages is very clearly a race against the bulldozers," said Rorie Skei, the group's deputy director for natural resources and planning.

On the Net: <http://www.calwild.org/>

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