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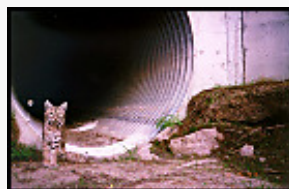
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Project shows how to link habitats for wild animals

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Courtesy of Sandy Sauvajot

Suggested open-space corridors include pipe culverts such as this one north of Tierra Rejada Road on Highway 23.

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California kingsnakes need plenty of room to slither around without getting crushed by cars.

Mountain lions need fellow cats from far-away hills to mate with, and steelhead trout need long, clean rivers to spawn up and down before returning to the ocean.

Therefore, Southern California needs to connect the islands of habitat scattered among suburbia to create a network of open space for wildlife to do the things wildlife do.

So says South Coast Wildlands, an environmental group that just completed a massive project to figure out a way to link all the isolated swaths of habitat in biologically diverse Southern California. The plan released this month to connect the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills to the Santa Susana and the Sierra Madre mountain ranges in Los Padres National Forest was the final piece of the grand map connecting the Mexican desert to the snow-capped Sierra Nevada.

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"Southern California is fundamentally one interconnected natural system, and the ultimate system of linkages will keep it that way," said Kristeen Penrod, executive director of South Coast Wildlands. "If we don't do this, we are going to start losing our biodiversity."

The report, called Missing Linkages, examines 15 specific connections in Southern California that need to be established so that gene pools remain diverse, populations have room to expand and wild animals have places to live. The project started after a 2000 meeting where scientists from around the state realized there were too few opportunities for species to move between ecosystems.

Specific designs — such as tunnels under busy roads or open space corridors for wildlife to live in and migrate through — are laid out in the plan, which details the regions at individual parcel plot levels.

More than 125,000 acres of open space between Los Padres National Forest and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area are named as areas that need protecting to create wildlife corridors. The V-shaped chunk of land is about 25 miles long and 5 miles wide in places.

About 34 percent is already set aside for conservation; the remaining land is mostly private and undeveloped. The areas could be used for recreational hiking and biking trails as well.

The wildlife corridors and development don't have to be mutually exclusive, Penrod said. With knowledge of existing pathways, developers can build in a way to allow wildlife and people to coexist, she said.

The report is intended to be a guidepost for cities, California Department of Transportation and land protection groups such as the Nature Conservancy looking to mitigate the effects of development on wildlife.

Moorpark Councilwoman Roseann Mikos said the report could help guide the city in planning decisions. The footprint of the recently defeated North Park Village and Nature Preserve would have been in the corridor, which, Mikos said, echoes the need for a comprehensive study of wildlife movement.

In Simi Valley, part of the more than 2,000 acres recently acquired by the Simi Valley Landfill lies in the corridor. Spokeswoman Kit Cole said the report could help determine how that land is used in the future.

South Coast Wildlands proposes wildlife corridors under Highway 101

at Liberty Canyon Road, Las Virgenes Creek and the Conejo Grade. Other roads, such as Highways 118, 126 and 23, are seen as impediments and in need of wildlife connectors. Many of the proposed corridors are existing underpasses, culverts or drainage ditches that are suitable for wildlife, Penrod said. The Santa Clara River is included in the report as an area that needs to be preserved.

The section that links the Santa Monica Mountains to the vast wilds of California has 20 plant and animal species from mountain lions to big-berry manzanitas.

"These species were selected because they are sensitive to habitat loss and fragmentation," Penrod said. "If we can maintain these species, we are going to capture a number of ecological interactions and maintain them."

Besides being known as a region of rapid growth and urban sprawl, Southern California is regarded as one of the richest, most biologically diverse areas in the world. Conservation International named most of the state as one of the world's 25 biological hot spots, regions defined by their high rate of endemic and endangered species that face significant threats.

An ongoing study of mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains is looking into whether the animals in the area could face inbreeding and other issues associated with isolated populations.

"The south coast of California is probably the most biologically rich region in all of North America, and it is also an eternally popular place to live," said E.J. Remson, project director for the Nature Conservancy. "Those two things have come together to present some interesting challenges for those in conservation."

Remson said his group will use the report to look at where land may be purchased or put into conservation easements, as it has in other parts of the state.

"It's exciting to have this data so we can start making these connections based upon science," Remson said.

Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area superintendent Woody Smeck said merely having parks set aside may not be enough.

"The importance of preserving these connections really gets to the heart of preserving the investments we have made in acquiring public lands," Smeck said.

"Without these connections, the investments we have made are compromised."

On the Net

<http://www.scwildlands.org>

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