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## Wildlife links important for survival, report says *Mountain lions, deer, toads all must navigate freeways*

BY ERIC LEACH, Staff Writer

SIMI VALLEY - For years, wildlife experts have been tracking animals with radio collars and cameras to learn where they live and how they move around Southern California, sometimes traveling underneath freeways through small tunnels.

Like house cats crawling under beds and into closets, mountain lions and bobcats squeeze under bushes and into tunnels other animals avoid.

One mountain lion tracked with a radio collar crossed under the Ronald Reagan Freeway at least 18 times using the 15- by 15-foot-wide, 190-foot-long concrete Corriganville tunnel at the east end of Simi Valley.

Now, wildlife authorities from more than 15 agencies have pooled their knowledge of wild creatures in a plan designed to protect the animals threatened by Southern California development.

The plan, which is nearly complete, is expected to be a guide for environmental impact reports on future developments near parks and other open lands, including areas between the Los Padres National Forest and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

"Animals need connectivity to get from one area to another," said Ray Sauvajot, chief of planning, science and resource management for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. "Connectivity is going to be critical for those animals to survive. What is unique in this area is that the public has made tremendous investments in parks and open spaces. If we want to make sure there is wildlife in these areas, we need to maintain connectivity."

Scientists, including those from the National Park Service and South Coast Wildlands, developed reports on 15 key wildlife linkages or corridors from the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Baja California. Other agencies involved include the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Nature Conservancy and the California State Parks Department.

A 145-page report on the links between Los Padres National Forest and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area was released this month, and other reports are expected to come out later this year.

The Los Padres-Santa Monica Mountains report says, "Nowhere is the threat to connectivity more severe than in Southern California - our nation's largest urban area, and still one of the fastest growing."

California is "one of the 25 most important hot spots of biological diversity on Earth," but Southern California is particularly threatened by development that has already closed off natural pathways once used by animals to move from one place to another, according to the report.

"Habitat loss and fragmentation are the leading threats to biodiversity, both globally and in Southern California," the report continues. "Efforts to combat these threats must focus on conserving well-connected networks of large wildland areas where natural ecological and evolutionary processes can continue."

Kristeen Penrod, executive director of South Coast Wildlands, a nonprofit agency set up to protect, connect and restore Southern California's wildlands, called the new reports a blueprint that should help deter development of key wildlife habitats.

"There are many opportunities to improve the situation. These areas are fundamentally one interconnected, natural system. What we're really trying to do is keep it that way," Penrod said.

Penrod said Caltrans, which is planning to widen the Ronald Reagan Freeway, is already seeking to preserve wildlife routes spanning this and other freeways.

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One proposal in the report is to leave the Rocky Peak overpass at the top of the Santa Susana Pass in a natural state for an animal crossing, possibly adding a decomposed granite surface rather than pavement, and even moving the on- and off-ramps there to another location.

"It's critical to have a great working relationship with Caltrans," Penrod said.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has already initiated habitat-restoration efforts along the potential passageways for animals in the Las Virgenes area, where the acquisition of Ahmanson Ranch by the state in 2003 helped connect the Simi Hills to the Santa Monicas.

At the west end of Simi Valley, mountain lions have been tracked moving back and forth across the freeway northwest of the landfill at Alamos Canyon, where there is an underpass and tunnel connecting the Simi Hills to the Arroyo Simi and the Tierra Rejada Valley near the Reagan Library.

More than 125,000 acres are included in the wildlife linkages or corridors identified in the report. About 34 percent of the land is already protected, Penrod said, leaving about 64,000 acres in need of protection either through conservation easements or land acquisition.

Officials studied and tracked the movements of mountain lions, bobcats, badgers, mule deer, snakes, toads, butterflies, woodpeckers, steelhead trout and even ants.

The report found the most hospitable route for mountain lions to move through the area was from the Los Padres National Forest near Lake Piru across the Santa Clara River into the Santa Susana Mountains, then across the 118 around Rocky Peak Road and through the Simi Hills west of the San Fernando Valley. Also, through the Agoura Hills-Calabasas area, across the Ventura Freeway around Las Virgenes-Malibu Canyon and into the Santa Monicas around Malibu Creek State Park.

"The connections between the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains is limited to Las Virgenes-Liberty Canyon area, which is becoming increasingly constrained by development," Sauvajot said.

There are five mountain lions known to be living in the Santa Monicas: a male and his four offspring, two young males and two females.

Officials say the young males are likely to run into territorial conflicts with their father and could be forced to move out of the Santa Monicas, possibly into the Simi Hills or farther north, so they will need access to these areas.

One of these young lions tagged with a radio collar has already walked up to about 500 feet from the 101 at the Liberty Canyon underpass, but turned back.

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