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Wildlife paths under siege

Findings show development is cutting off corridors essential to mixed breeding grounds for many wild species.

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The Orange County Register



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A majority of the state's wildlife corridors, including eight affecting critical habitats in Orange County, are severely threatened by development, according to a report released Monday by a coalition of conservation and government groups.

The corridors are paths that animals use to travel from one large living area to another. When a path is cut off, such as by development, the animals can become isolated in a single area. That can prevent them from finding enough food, and it reduces the number of possible mates, resulting in inbreeding that weakens the species.

The California Wilderness Coalition report identified more than 200 wildlife corridors across the state.

"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."

But a majority of these pathways are becoming fragmented, endangering the existence of mountain lions, bald eagles, bighorn sheep and migratory birds across the state.

Some of the most impaired corridors were found in Southern California, where development is most intense, the report found.

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

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The survey - the first to cover an entire state - underscores the importance of corridors in preserving genetic diversity and the sustainability of wildlife populations, scientists 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, said Paul Spitler, the coalition's executive director.

Southern California has the most fragmented habitat in the state, making it a key focus for restoration efforts, Spitler said.

"When you have isolated patches of habitat, you start losing species," he said.

Biodiversity erased by development

The 79-page study identified 232 migration corridors used by mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles. A majority of the routes are threatened by human activity, including eight areas that run through Orange County.

"South Orange County is a global hot spot for biodiversity," said Christine Penrod, a spokeswoman for the South Coast Wildlands Project, referring to five threatened south county corridors identified in the report.

Those pathways include the Bonita Creek, El Toro, Aliso Canyon-Laguna Canyon Wilderness, Oso Creek and Cristianitos corridors.

Penrod said her group is focusing on many of these corridors, which are used by the Arroyo toad, the least Bell's vireo and other migratory birds.

M.A. Sanjayan, director of conservation science for The Nature Conservancy, said 80 percent of the corridors in Southern California 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.

A highway, dam or subdivision can choke off the links between areas that have already been preserved.

The report showed that 14 percent of the corridors identified have already been erased by development.

Report is aimed at conservation

Corridors are vital for the long-term survival of species such as Chinook salmon, bighorn sheep and bald eagles, scientists said.

In Orange County, mountain lions, bobcats and coyotes need these links to exist, scientists said.

But many of these animals live on isolated preserves hemmed in by development, the report showed.

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

The Davis-based wilderness coalition co-sponsored 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.

Spitler said the report will be used to influence state conservation policy, which has traditionally focused on core habitat areas but not on the links that join them.

Penrod said she will use the survey to educate developers on the need to maintain existing corridors and create new ones as new development arises, including the proposed southern extension of the Foothill (241) Toll Road, which would intrude on critical habitat in south county.

"The protection of these linkages within these eco-regions is key to ensuring the long-term persistence of biodiversity in the state," she said.

Environmentalists point to the success of the Coal Canyon corridor as an example of how state and private land- owners can work together to restore these pathways to better serve native wildlife.

Last month, state parks officials struck a deal to buy the final link in the corridor. The state plans to return the Coal Canyon corridor to a natural condition by ripping out freeway on- and off-ramps and asphalt roadway and replacing them with a stream bed and native vegetation. Hiking and horseback riding will probably be permitted.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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