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News

Published Tuesday, August 7, 2001

Report identifies habitat corridors

- Many are blocked by roads or are threatened by future development

By Mike Taugher
 CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Grizzly bears and salmon. Condors. Bighorn sheep. Wolverines, martens and fishers.

They're all part of California's natural heritage, and all are either absent from the state or are here in depressed numbers.

Today, a group of scientists will release a report they are calling a first-of-its-kind attempt to help stanch the loss of wildlife and maybe recover a little bit of it.

"Missing Linkages" is an inventory of 232 wildlife corridors that connect core habitat areas throughout the state, ranging in width from a couple of hundred yards to several miles.

"A lot of these bridges could be severed by development or roads," said Paul Spitzer, executive director of the California Wilderness Coalition, who helped conceive organize the study. "The majority we found are threatened by development, without anyone even knowing that they're there."

Taken together, these corridors function as bridges for wildlife between islands in what can be an inhospitable sea. By connecting these places, conservationists say, wildlife corridors increase the value of core habitat areas by helping to boost the flow of genes from place to place and prevent isolated populations from dying off.

For that reason, some conservationists call corridors

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The Times investigates the condition of East Bay nursing homes.

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"biodiversity bargains."

"It is likely that in the coming few decades, the establishment of major new protected areas in California will become increasingly rare," the authors wrote in the report's introduction. "Thus, keeping existing wild places connected is the only rational means of maintaining enough accessible habitat for many species that call California home."

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In the Bay Area, the report identified 23 corridors important to such species as mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, two species of fox, mule deer, tule elk, and several species of bats. They also included the travel needs of some birds, including eagles and shore birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish, including chinook salmon and steelhead.

By capturing the needs of large mammals and migrating fish, the scientists expect to cover the needs of most other species.

The Bay-Delta estuary, for example, is part of an obvious corridor for steelhead and salmon that is also used by many other species.

Corridors between East Bay parks and along Bay shorelines were identified as important.

And a portion of the Altamont Hills was named as one of a handful of Bay Area corridors barely functioning as a "choke point" for traversing San Joaquin kit fox, golden eagles, burrowing owls, California condors and California tiger salamanders.

Bound by development, Interstate 580, Los Vaqueros Reservoir and windmills, the area was listed as one of the important corridor areas in the Bay Area that is severely threatened but also has a strong chance of being saved.

In gauging opportunities to preserve corridor areas, the report looked at the willingness of landowners to sell, local support for conservation efforts, the ability of government agencies to acquire land in the area and the existence of land use plans.

About 150 scientists and land use officials from universities, environmental groups and government agencies participated in the study.

The project began about 2 1/2 years ago during a lunch conversation between Spitler and M.A. Sanjayan of the Nature Conservancy. Over dim sum at a San Francisco restaurant, the two Northern California conservationists bemoaned the lack of knowledge about wildlife corridors, and decided to organize the conference that took place the San Diego Zoo last year.

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The "Missing Linkages" report was the result of that conference.

Of the 232 corridors identified by scientists, more than half were blocked by roads, while 60 percent of the corridors were threatened by further development.

But the report also found that there was nothing at all blocking about 42 of the corridors.

"The good news is that there are a number of wildlife corridors in California that are still being used by wildlife and have the opportunity to continue to function if we take action," said Spitler.

"The bad news is there are a number of corridors in the state that have been severed by past land use activities," he added.

*Mike Taugher covers energy and the environment.
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