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The Cat is Back: Analyzing Newspaper Coverage of Mountain Lions in the Midwest

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The Cat is Back:
Analyzing Newspaper Coverage of Mountain Lions in the Midwest

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Introduction

A Missouri farmer heard a “screeching yell” on his property, late one night in 1996. He thought his bulls were fighting, so he got in his pickup and went out to investigate. Instead of fighting bulls, he found something he had never encountered in the 35 years since he’d been born on the property. He found a mountain lion, dragging a deer. Uhlenbrock wrote this story for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, (Uhlenbrock, 1996).

A mountain lion sighting in Missouri was considered a freak occurrence, because at the time, the real story hadn’t broken yet. Mountain lions had begun wandering a new migration path through Missouri. As new mountain lion sightings increased, the story would gain a higher priority with the press.

When mountain lions stay in remote wilderness areas, they give the public no major cause for concern. However, when mountain lions are seen near schools, in backyards or on the streets of Chicago, they become a public safety issue. Though mountain lion attacks on humans are rare, the danger of a child in close proximity to such a predator cannot be ignored.

The mountain lion that is prompting states to form special response teams and release official statements is the *Puma concolor*, which also goes by the common names of mountain lion, cougar, puma and catamount, just to name a few. In the Puma Identification Guide, Shaw, Beier, Culver and Grigione (2007) said mountain lions can be seven to eight feet in length, from nose to tail, and they weigh between 80 to 160 pounds as adults, (Shaw et al., 2007, p. 2). Perhaps the most distinct feature of the mountain lion is its long tail, which can be up to half its body length, (Shaw et al, 2007, p. 2). This tail sets the mountain lion apart from America’s other big cats, the lynx and the bobcat, which are smaller overall and have proportionally shorter tails.

Mountain lions generally prey on deer, (“Mountain Lion,” National Geographic), though they will eat an array of other animals, depending on where they are.

After their near-elimination from the eastern half of North America in the early 20th century, mountain lions are now showing up in the Midwest in increasing numbers. These appearances have been chronicled in Midwestern newspapers as mountain lions get too close for comfort, wandering through neighborhoods, or coming into contact with people and their animals.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch article took a simplistic approach to describe what led to the elimination of mountain lions from the Midwest by the 1920s, including logging and indiscriminate shooting, but in reality there were more forces involved. Mountain lions once populated almost the entirety of North and South America, “up into the Canadian Yukon and south to the Chilean Patagonia,” (“Natural History”). Gill explained that the first European colonists feared the untamed wilderness due to wild predators like mountain lions, and they sought to “use, alter or destroy anything in nature that impeded progress,” (Gill, 2010, p. 7).

As the wild spaces made way for civilization, mountain lions fell prey to habitat loss and the predator control efforts of farmers and frontiersmen, (Gill, 2010, p. 8). Ranchers in the western part of the United States began to join together to protect their livestock and lobby for predator control.

When Theodore Roosevelt inherited the office in 1901, conservation made its way onto the national agenda, (Bolgiano, 2001, pp. 42). During his two terms as president, Roosevelt increased national forest lands from 43 million to 194 million acres, but he did not believe that all parts of wilderness were deserving of equal protection. The Bureau of Biological Survey came into existence in 1905, (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1982), giving the federal

government oversight of predator control. It was these government-funded bounty programs, in combination with the efforts of the Bureau of Biological Survey's professional hunters—they employed over 200 professional mountain lion hunters by the 1930s—that led to a significant decrease in America's mountain lion population, (Gill, 2010). “By the time systematic assassination of predators stopped... some sixty-five thousand dead cougars had been tallied throughout western North America,” (Bolgiano, 2001, pp. 43). By the early 1900s, the mountain lion's range had been reduced to half of its original size, (Gill, 2010).

In 1973 the eastern cougar, a subspecies of mountain lion, was added to the endangered species list. In May 2011, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service declared the subspecies extinct, (US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011). The USFWS said in a news release that the subspecies has probably been extinct since the 1930s and that any mountain lions seen in the former range of the eastern cougar are probably of a different subspecies.

The 1996 story of a Missouri farmer's encounter with a mountain lion may have come as a shock to those who still believed that mountain lions had completely disappeared from the Midwest in the 1920s, but evidence is now mounting that mountain lions are reclaiming some of their former territory.

There have been 21 confirmed mountain lion sightings in Missouri since 1990, including eight confirmed sightings in 2011 alone, (“Central Midwest”). The Cougar Network, a nonprofit research organization that studies mountain lion recolonization, keeps track of confirmed mountain lion sightings. The Cougar Network only confirms mountain lion sightings that involve tangible evidence and that are thought to be wild mountain lions, rather than escaped captive animals, (“Cougar Confirmations”). These confirmed sightings fall into two categories: Class I confirmations involve the body of a mountain lion (dead or alive), photographs, video, or DNA

evidence (hair, scat, etc); Class II confirmations involve track sets verified by a professional or other evidence as verified by a professional, including prey carcasses, (“Cougar Confirmations”).

Missouri is not the only state that has been affected. The neighboring states of Iowa and Illinois have also had a handful of confirmations. These confirmations may be attributed to mountain lions wandering over from states like Nebraska, where mountain lions have recently started breeding in the non-populous northwest corner of the state, (“Mountain Lion”, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission).

The recent increase in sightings of mountain lions in the Midwest has met with varying degrees of acknowledgement among each state’s wildlife agency. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) says that mountain lions are extirpated in Missouri, (“Facts You Should Know”), but they employ a Mountain Lion Response Team to investigate reports and evidence of mountain lions in the state. The MDC says that mountain lions in Missouri are merely passing through, but they admit that these visitors might eventually begin breeding in the state, (“Mountain Lion,” Missouri Department of Conservation). The MDC’s official stance on mountain lions, as of 2006, is, “It is not desirable to encourage the re-establishment of a mountain lion population in Missouri. The Department has not and has no plans to stock mountain lions in Missouri,” (“Mountain Lion,” Missouri Department of Conservation). Though it is illegal to kill a mountain lion in Missouri, unless the animal is threatening human safety or the lives of domestic animals, (“Facts You Should Know”) the state seldom prosecutes the killing of mountain lions.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) has acknowledged a breeding population in the northwest corner of the state, in addition to 52 confirmed sightings throughout the rest of the state, which they attribute to dispersing male mountain lions, (“Mountain Lion,”

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission). A statement under the “Future” section of the NGPC’s webpage about mountain lions says, “A combination of understanding and tolerance will allow us to coexist with mountain lions and prevent us from repeating the mistake of extirpating this magnificent feline from Nebraska once again,” (“Mountain Lion,” Nebraska Game and Parks Commission).

Despite a handful of recent confirmations, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has not released any information or official statements about mountain lions.

One of the reasons mountain lions are becoming an important issue in the Midwest is dispersal. Thompson and Jenks (2010) described dispersal as when a mountain lion moves away permanently from the population area in which it was born, (Thompson and Jenks, 2010, p. 1). Young mountain lions become independent from their mothers at around 13 months, and a couple months later, they either disperse or join the population in which they were born, (Thompson & Jenks, 2010). A study of mountain lions in the Black Hills of South Dakota showed that male mountain lions from that area dispersed an average of 275 km from where they were born, (Thompson & Jenks, 2010, p. 1). Because many young male mountain lions may travel long distances from their birthplaces, it is inevitable that they will appear in areas that do not typically have mountain lion populations.

However, as certain mountain lion populations become too crowded, and more young males are encouraged to disperse, it becomes possible for mountain lion to establish a new population or to recolonize in an area where a population once was, (Sweanor, Logan and Hornocker, 2000). According to the Cougar Network, mountain lions have established two new populations in recent years, one in North Dakota and another in Nebraska, (“Cougar Facts”).

Some mountain lion sightings in the Midwest are just young males passing through, but some of these sightings may be indicators of recolonization. Whether they are dispersing or establishing new populations, these mountain lion present an interesting problem for wildlife management. Porter's *Omaha World-Herald* article quoted a South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department official who stated the issue succinctly: "We don't have any place for them to go if we trapped and removed them. We have no habitat in South Dakota where we could turn one loose with any expectation that it would stay. No zoo wants one. None of the western states wants them. In fact, they want to give theirs to us," (Porter, 2000).

Because most Midwesterners have never encountered wild mountain lions, it is important to understand what type of information is available to them through the news media. Siemer, Decker and Shanahan (2007) argued that "News stories have the potential to influence public perceptions about wildlife-related problems and how those problems might be managed," (Decker and Shanahan, 2007, p. 90). Information about news coverage of mountain lions would therefore be valuable to wildlife agencies in states with increasing mountain lion sightings, as well as in states where mountain lions may appear or recolonize in the future.

As these creatures appear more often in Midwestern states, they will inevitably appear more often in Midwestern newspapers. This study seeks to analyze the news coverage of mountain lions as published in Midwestern newspapers.

Due to the strict time constraints involved in television news, news stories about unconfirmed mountain lion sightings would be more likely to appear in a newspaper than on television. Because stories about mountain lion sightings almost never involve photos or videos, these stories would lack the visual elements required of a television news broadcast item. Additionally, the newspaper format allows for more in-depth coverage of mountain lion stories,

allowing reporters to include background information about scientific evidence of mountain lion recolonization. For these reasons, this study has determined newspapers to be a significant source of information about mountain lions.

Literature Review

The subject of mountain lions in the eastern part of the United States is as controversial and mysterious as mountain lions are themselves. Scientists are wary of the legitimacy of mountain lion sightings when physical evidence is not available, and even when mountain lions are confirmed by physical evidence, there is controversy over their origins. Mountain lions found outside of their normal habitat can be attributed to transient mountain lions from neighboring states or escaped captive mountain lions. There is also disagreement over whether mountain lions are forming breeding populations in eastern states, or if they are merely passing through.

In 1981 the United States Fish and Wildlife Services published the Eastern Cougar Recovery Plan, which called for a thorough search for evidence of eastern cougar populations. This plan referred to a subspecies known as the eastern cougar or *Felis concolor cougar*, now known as *Puma concolor cougar*, which was added to the endangered species list in 1973 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011).

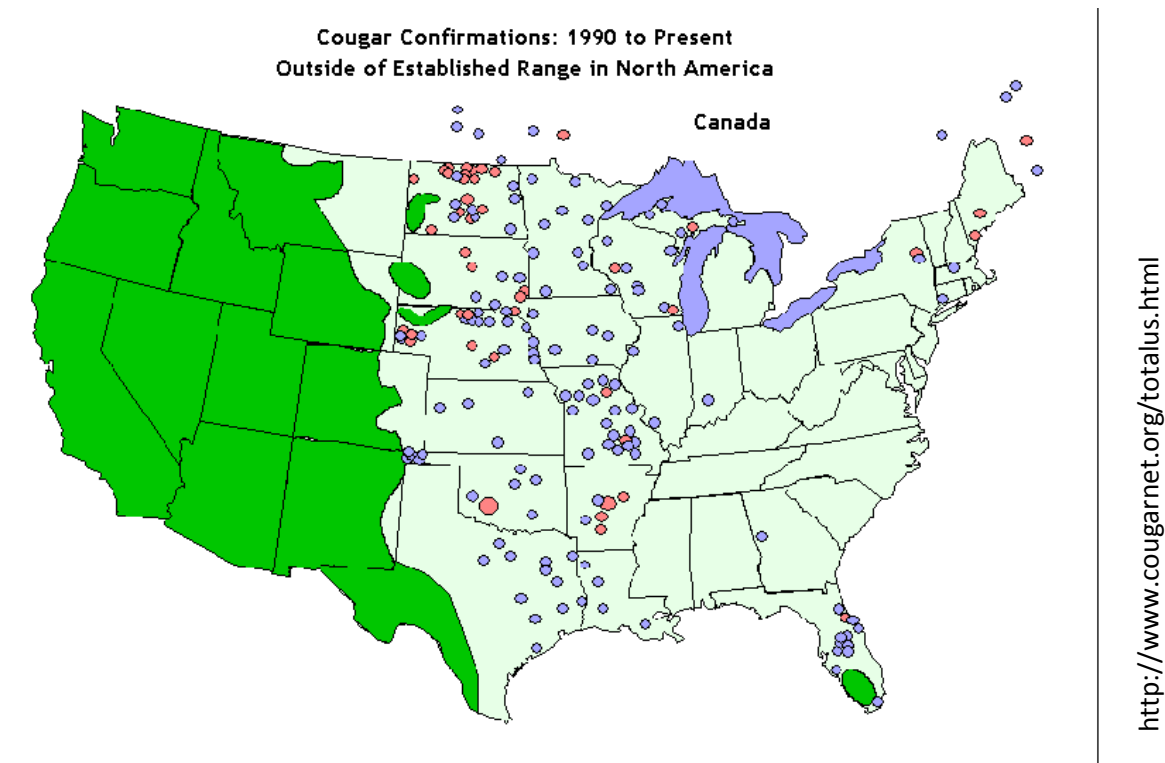
The plan was never implemented, (Bolgiano, 2005, p. 132), but it provides a good summary of how the eastern cougar came to its current status. The eastern cougar “originally occurred within South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, and all states to the north and east,” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1982). Early settlers eliminated mountain lions from these areas due to fear of the animal, threat to livestock and monetary incentives offered by states.

“There is no doubt that cougars were virtually eliminated from each region soon after it became settled by European immigrants,” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1982).

A composite study of twelve mountain lion confirmations in eastern North America was conducted in 2000. Bolgiano, Lester, Linzey and Maehr examined confirmations in West Virginia, Missouri, Illinois, Massachusetts, Vermont, Virginia, Maine, Maryland, North Carolina, Newbrunswick and Ontario between 1976 and 2000, (Bolgiano et al., 2005). The authors speculated over the origins of these confirmed mountain lions, citing escaped captives, remnant native eastern cougars and colonizers from known mountain lion populations as possibilities. The speculation of remnant eastern cougar populations has recently been dispelled, but this study showed that mountain lions are living (even if temporarily) outside of their normal habitats in the United States.

The USFWS conducted a review of the eastern cougar, and in March 2011 they concluded that the subspecies is extinct and should be removed from the endangered species list, (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011). “Reports of cougars observed in the wild examined during the review process described mountain lions of other subspecies, often South American subspecies, that had been held in captivity and had escaped or been released to the wild, as well as wild mountain lions of the western United States subspecies that had migrated eastward to the Midwest,” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011, p. 1).

So the subject of interest today is the eastward migration of western mountain lions, not the possibility that the eastern cougar subspecies has survived in small numbers. The Cougar Network currently documents confirmations of “wild, free-roaming cougars” outside of their normal habitats, (“Cougar Confirmations”).



Green: established populations. Blue: Class I confirmations. Red: Class II confirmations.

The Cougar Network notes that an increasing mountain lion presence outside of their normal habitat is becoming evident, especially in the Midwest, (“Cougar Facts”).

It is uncertain whether confirmed Midwestern cougars represent individuals re-colonizing from the West, or former captives that have adapted to the wild. Regardless, the long-distance dispersal capabilities of cougars, proximity of this region to established populations, recent cougar confirmations, and opinions of cougar experts indicates re-colonization of the Midwest is certainly possible. Further, western cougar populations appear to be growing, which may partially explain their expansion into the Midwest, (“Cougar Facts”).

The reality of increased mountain lion sightings in the Midwest and the possibility of western mountain lions migrating to the Midwest have wide-ranging implications for wildlife

management agencies and for the general public. History shows that mountain lions in this part of the country have been treated as a nuisance, but Midwesterners today have no memory of the eastern cougar that their ancestors did away with almost a hundred years ago. The unique status of the mountain lion in the American Midwest raises many new questions. Public opinion of the issue has already arisen as a subject of research interest, and so far at least one study has been published on the topic. Davenport, Nielsen and Mangun wrote, “While human communities near long-established mountain lion populations have learned to live with the predator, it is unclear how communities where mountain lions have long been extirpated will respond and adapt to the species’ recolonization,” (Davenport et al., 2011, p. 374).

A 2010 mail survey examined attitudes toward mountain lion management in North Dakota and Kentucky. The study found that people in both places were effectively neutral toward mountain lion management policies—they favored control policies just as much as they favored protection policies, (Davenport et al., 2011). Residents of North Dakota, where a breeding mountain lion population has recently been confirmed, had attitudes that were deep-rooted and based on fundamental beliefs, (Davenport et al., 2011). But in Kentucky, where there are no mountain lions, residents based their attitudes on emotions, which are less stable and more susceptible to outside influence, (Davenport et al., 2011).

Additionally, while Kentucky residents did not receive much information about mountain lions at all, North Dakota residents received most of their information through the news media, (Davenport et al., 2011). This means that the news media in North Dakota (and likely other areas with a renewed mountain lion population) will play a key role in informing the public. As mountain lion re-colonization emerges as a topic of public interest, the news media will have the

opportunity to frame the issue in one way or another (i.e. a conservation issue versus a public safety issue), which could potentially influence public opinion.

Although there is little formal research available on public opinion of mountain lion re-colonization, insight may be gleaned from studies on other species. For example, the gray wolf's history with Americans is highly reminiscent of the mountain lion's. Houston, Bruskotter and Fan (2010) wrote that the gray wolf was extirpated from 95 percent of its original range in North America, but it has started to make a comeback since the 1973 Endangered Species Act, (Houston et al., 2010, p. 390).

Houston conducted a content analysis of news stories about wolves in the United States and Canada, spanning from 1999 to 2008. The study found that news articles were mostly negative toward wolves—72% of attitude expressions were negative, (Houston et al., 2010, p. 397). Additionally, they found that states without wolves had the most positive expressions, while states with *new* wolf populations had the most negative attitudes, and national papers and newswires had the fewest positive expressions, (Houston et al., 2010). They found that most of these news articles “concerned wolves’ impact on human activities and the question of whether wolves should be killed/controlled in order to reduce their ‘negative effects’ on humans,” (Houston et al, 2010). Many of these news stories focused on wolves as a threat to livestock, pets and humans, (Houston et al, 2010, p. 399).

While attitudes about wolves have been shown to correlate with a geographic area's history of wolf populations, such a correlation has not been studied with mountain lions. Additionally, some research shows that social attitudes about mountain lions and wolves differ in significant ways.

Kellert, Black, Rush and Bath (1996) reviewed public perception of wolves, mountain lions and grizzly bears, using “original research, literature review, and historical and other secondary sources,” (Kellert et al., 1996, p. 978). Kellert’s study argued that mountain lions do not have the cultural importance that wolves do, and that mountain lions are only a topic of discussion in areas where there are no gray wolves, (Kellert et al., 1996, p. 981). American settlers brought with them long-standing traditional attitudes about wolves, which are often featured in European folklore; as there are no mountain lions in Europe, they were less culturally important in America, (Kellert et al., 1996, p. 983).

"Mountain lions almost certainly pose greater threats to humans and their livelihood than do wolves, and they occupy a much greater range within North America than do grizzlies. Yet the mountain lion's role in cultural history and contemporary awareness has been far less significant than that of wolves or bears,” (Kellert et al., 1996, p. 981).

This study suggests that mountain lions simply have a lower status in American culture than other large carnivores—namely wolves and bears—meaning that mountain lions appear less often in the news. Kellert gave several examples to suggest that the public is generally unknowledgeable about mountain lions and therefore opinions are mostly neutral.

In the fifteen years since Kellert’s study was published, however, the status of mountain lions in North America may have changed. In some areas, the mere sighting of a mountain lion is deemed newsworthy.

In February 2009, Indianapolis’ WTHR 13 posted an article to their website concerning reported mountain lion sightings in Terre Haute. The article explained that an elementary school near the location of the sightings had cancelled recess, opting to keep the children inside, in light of the mountain lion sightings. The article quoted a local detective who said "Until we can

determine there's no threat we're going to act like there is one,” (“School Recess Canceled after Reported Cougar Sighting,” 2009). The article also mentioned that a mountain lion had escaped from a nearby feline rescue center three years before the sightings.

The reporting on the Terre Haute mountain lion sighting is tame compared to the Chicago Sun-Times’ coverage of a mountain lion that appeared in a North Chicago neighborhood in 2008. On March 30, the headline “Really big cat alarms N. Chicago” appeared on page 15 of the news section, (Sun Lake County News, 2008).

On April 15, a longer article titled “Cops gun down big cat on N. Side; Animal was on the prowl in Roscoe Village” appeared on page 5 of the news section. The article used dramatic language, describing the sound of gunshots, in addition to several quotes from people who lived in the neighborhood, (Donovan, 2008). Near the end of the article, the reporter added that the mountain lion “will be examined to see if it has a chip that might lead authorities to the owner,” but she did not mention the possibility that it could be a wild mountain lion, or that the incident could be a small part of a much larger issue. The April 15 article, which seemed to showcase the novelty of the incident, provides a stark contrast from the April 16 article.

On April 16, “Looks at us as food'; Cops, mayor defend shooting as experts try to find how predator got here” appeared on page 2 of the news section, with 665 words and six reporters listed in the byline. This article gave more detailed information on the mountain lion, including the conclusion that “there doesn't seem to be any doubt the cougar was a wild animal,” (Sweeney, Spak and Rozek, 2008). The authors paraphrased a museum curator who said that the animal’s population had increased since predator controls allowing people to kill mountain lions had been lifted for forty years. The story includes a few dramatic quotes, including one from an animal control officer who said “They are not afraid of people. They attack people. Children

have a tendency to run and become prey to them,” and a police superintendent who said “And while it looks very playful and very sweet . . . that cat was about a block away from an elementary school. It looks at us as food. The officers acted properly,” (Sweeney et al., 2008).

The increasingly dramatic coverage of a mountain lion that appeared in North Chicago presents an interesting tableau of a mountain lion that showed up where it was least expected. Sightings got the animal mentioned on page fifteen, a killing bumped the story to page 5 and frightening quotes tacked on to results of the mountain lion’s necropsy culminated in a detailed story on page 2. The Sun Times’ coverage presents the mountain lion as a fearful animal, with sensational headlines that use wording like “on the prowl” and “sees us as food.” These articles show that fear and drama could be an important aspect of mountain lion news coverage in the Midwest.

Methodology

This study seeks to analyze news coverage of mountain lions in three Midwestern newspapers. News articles were gathered from one major newspaper in each of three Midwestern states, selected based on recent sightings of mountain lions and availability of news coverage about mountain lions. The newspapers used were the Omaha World Herald from Nebraska, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch from Missouri and the Chicago Sun-Times from Illinois. Articles from these newspapers were gathered from the Lexis Nexis database. Questions were intended to determine what types of mountain lions stories are appearing frequently in newspapers and to analyze the depth of coverage in news articles about mountain lions.

Six basic research questions were developed to guide the analysis of the news articles:

1. Does the story mention any scientific information about mountain lions, including the possibility of their return to the Midwest?
2. Does the story offer any practical advice concerning mountain lions, i.e. what to do in an encounter, or how to report a sighting?
3. What attitude toward mountain lions does the story encourage (i.e. fear, admiration)?
4. Does the story use any dramatic narratives, quotes or headlines, or does it use calm, factual, unemotional language?
5. What type of story does the article report?
6. When was the story printed? On which section and page does the story appear?

These six basic questions were then broken down to simplify and streamline the analysis. For question one, the scientific information discussed in the story was broken into three topics: recolonization (the story mentions the possibility of mountain lions reestablishing a population in the Midwest), dispersal (the story mentions possible origins of Midwestern mountain lion sightings, or explains why a wandering mountain lion would be found in the Midwest), and natural history (the story mentions previous extirpation of mountain lions in the Midwest, or mentions information on historical mountain lion populations).

The second question was broken into four types of practical advice concerning mountain lions: how to report sightings, how to properly identify mountain lions, what to do in a mountain lion encounter and legal information concerning mountain lions and hunting laws.

The third question was broken into three responses: fear (the story focuses on dangers of mountain lions and their recolonization, or the story favors controlling Midwestern mountain lion populations), respect (the story focuses on benefits of a mountain lion population, or

expresses a desire for the preservation of mountain lion populations) and neutral (the story paints mountain lions in neither a positive nor negative light).

For the fourth question, practical judgment was used to determine if the story used sensational and dramatic wording—only obvious and extreme cases of sensationalism were coded as dramatic wording.

For the fifth question, stories were broken down by the following types: sighting, human-mountain lion interaction or encounter, hunting information, legal information, recolonization, scientific findings, advice about mountain lion encounters and opinions.

Information was gathered from all the stories based on the six preceding questions, assembled, compared and analyzed for patterns within each paper and across all three.

Results

This study examined a total of 248 articles from three Midwestern papers: 49 from the Chicago Sun-Times, 48 from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and 151 from the Omaha World Herald. The articles ranged in date from 1994 to 2011.

1. Does the story mention scientific information about mountain lions, specifically regarding dispersal, extirpation or recolonization?

	Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	Total
Total	28.57%	52.08%	15.23%	25%
Dispersal	10.20%	35.42%	10.60%	15.32%
Extirpation	12.24%	33.33%	3.31%	10.89%
Recolonization	16.33%	10.42%	1.32%	6.05%

25% of all stories mentioned at least one of the scientific ideas that mentioned in question one.

The most popular scientific idea was dispersal, with extirpation second and recolonization third.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch ran the most stories with scientific information, coming out to 52.08% of the stories in the study. The Omaha World Herald had the least with only 15.23% of stories containing scientific information.

2. Does the story offer any practical advice about mountain lions, specifically, how to identify a mountain lion, how to report a sighting, how to react to a mountain lion encounter and what laws govern the hunting or killing of mountain lions?

	Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	Total
Total	8.16%	20.83%	30.46%	24.19%
Identification	0	0	3.97%	2.42%
Encounter	4.08%	4.17%	9.27%	7.26%
Reporting	6.12%	2.08%	15.23%	11.29%
Law	0	12.5%	11.92%	9.68%

A total of 24.19% of stories in the study contained practical advice on one of the topics mentioned in question 2. The newspaper that printed the most advice was the Omaha World Herald; 30.46% of their stories contained advice. The Chicago Sun-Times had the least with 8.16% of their stories containing advice. The most popular form of advice was how to report a mountain lion sighting. Information on mountain lion laws was second, advice about interacting with wild mountain lions was third and information on identifying mountain lions was fourth. Only the Omaha World Herald printed stories that contained advice about identifying mountain lions.

3. What attitude toward mountain lions did the story encourage?

	Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	Total
Fear	24.49%	12.5%	9.27%	12.90%
Respect	12.24%	16.67%	5.30%	8.87%
Neutral	63.27%	70.83%	85.43%	78.23%

The overwhelming majority of stories in this study were neutral toward mountain lions. Overall, 78.23% of the stories were neutral. Fear was more popular than respect overall, although this trend was reversed in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch stories, which favored respect.

4. Does the story use sensational or dramatic wording?

Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	Total
4.08%	0	1.32%	1.61%

Only 4 stories in the study contained overtly dramatic or sensational wording. Two of these appeared in the Chicago Sun-Times, and 2 appeared in the Omaha World Herald. Overall these accounted for only 1.61% of the stories in the study.

5. Which category does the story fall under: sighting, human-mountain lion interaction (encounter), hunting information, legal information, recolonization, scientific findings, advice about mountain lions or opinion?

Sightings	91	36.69%
Encounters	55	22.18%
Hunting	3	1.21%
Legal	9	3.63%
Recolonization	9	3.63%
Scientific Findings	11	4.44%
Opinion	35	14.11%
Other	31	12.5%

The most popular story types found in the study were sightings, accounting for 36.69% of all articles, and encounters, accounting for 22.18% of all articles. The third most popular story type was opinion, which made up 14.11% of all articles in the study. This trend was found across

all three newspapers, except in the Chicago Sun-Times, which printed more opinion stories (22.45% of all Chicago stories) than encounter stories (14.29%).

6. When was the story printed? On which page and section does the story appear?

	Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	Total
1994	0	1	0	1
1995	1	0	3	4
1996	0	4	1	5
1997	0	2	3	5
1998	2	6	2	10
1999	0	3	19	22
2000	2	4	13	19
2001	2	3	5	10
2002	1	0	11	12
2003	0	3	19	22
2004	6	4	19	29
2005	2	3	26	31
2006	2	4	10	16
2007	2	1	1	4
2008	19	3	8	30
2009	5	1	11	17
2010	2	0	-	2
2011	2	6	-	8

With date of publication, there was no obvious trend in the data. There was no increasing or decreasing as years progressed, and stories seemed to appear randomly in clusters across all three newspapers.

Section	Chicago	St. Louis	Omaha	% of total stories
News	67.35%	37.5%	68.87%	62.5%
Sports	6.12%	12.5%	19.21%	15.32%
Editorials	18.37%	10.20%	9.93%	11.69%

Most of the stories appeared in the news section, while sports and editorials were also popular sections for mountain lion stories. Any stories not accounted for in the chart appeared in other special sections in each newspaper. Within these sections, the articles appeared across all page numbers with no apparent trends.

Discussion

The encroachment of mountain lions has the potential of having a very serious impact on populous societies in the Midwest. As of yet, newspapers have not focused on the bigger issues at hand, including recolonization. The majority of articles in the study failed to include information on extirpation or recolonization, and very few mentioned dispersal. This means that most stories about mountain lions in the Midwest were not put into the context of the larger picture. Without a basic mention of these concepts, it would be hard for readers to understand why mountain lions are showing up in the Midwest.

The most popular scientific concept mentioned in the articles was dispersal, which is probably the main cause of recent mountain lion sightings in the Midwest. Recolonization did not appear in many stories, because in many states there is not yet conclusive evidence that mountain lions are indeed establishing a population. Yet in Nebraska, the state that has recognized a newly established mountain lion population, there were only two articles that mentioned recolonization.

Practical advice was expressed in stories about as often as scientific information: roughly 25% of stories contained practical advice. The most popular types of advice were reporting sightings, legal information and what to do in an encounter. The emphasis on legal information

and interacting with mountain lions is important, because that type of information may not be intuitive for most people.

Advice on identifying mountain lions was seriously lacking in the articles from this study. Only the Omaha World Herald printed any information on identification. This is quite surprising, considering that many articles mention the fact that mountain lions are often misidentified, and most mountain lion sightings turn out to be dogs, bobcats or other animals. If the press wants to inform the public about mountain lions, they should provide readers with more information on identifying the animals.

This study did not make note of the placement of scientific information and practical advice within a story. In general, scientific information was scattered throughout stories, but most practical advice was tacked on to the very end of the story. Many readers may have missed this information by not reading the entire story.

The overwhelming majority of articles in the study were not emotionally charged at all. Very few articles promoted fear or respect of mountain lions; most reporters steered clear of emotional language, keeping a balance between focusing on positive and negative attributes of mountain lions. It is inevitable that the topic of mountain lions will tend to generate some amount of fear. The fact that these newspapers kept that down to a total of 13% (or 12%, leaving out the nine opinion articles and letters to the editor) of all stories is impressive.

Stories with dramatic or sensational wording were kept down to an even lower number. Only four articles out of the 151 included in the study contained dramatic or sensational language. To give an example of what constituted sensational language for the purposes of this study, the Chicago Sun-Times printed an article in 2008 that used the words “Looks at us as food” in the headline. Similarly, an Omaha World Herald article from 2005 described a woman

who fled a wooded area after seeing a mountain lion: “Not wishing to become cat food herself, she left the area.” Language like that adds very little substance to a news story, and it only serves to encourage an overly negative view of mountain lions.

The most popular story types in this study were sightings, encounters and opinion articles. Within the sighting articles, about 25% included scientific information and about 30% included practical advice—slightly more than the average across all story types. For encounter stories, about 16% contained scientific information and 24% contained practical advice. For opinion articles, about 11% contained scientific information and about 9% contained practical advice.

The final research question showed that most stories about mountain lions were printed in the news section. However, no trend was found with year of publication or page number. Stories appeared scattered throughout different years. At the Chicago Sun-Times, there was a huge spike in the number of stories in 2008—this was the year that a mountain lion was found roaming the streets of a North Chicago neighborhood.

To gain more insight on Midwestern news coverage of mountain lions, a similar study could be conducted using television and online news sources. Additionally, other studies on this topic could benefit from using more diverse newspaper sources, including rural, small-town papers.

Conclusion

This study has found that Midwestern newspaper articles about mountain lions are usually concerned with sightings and encounters. The majority of articles about these lions are emotionally neutral, and about a quarter of these articles contain either scientific information

about mountain lions or practical advice for those who might see or encounter a wild mountain lion.

The current trend shows that mountain lions are appearing with increasing frequency in the Midwest. They have established a breeding population in Nebraska, causing Missouri authorities to speculate that their state might be next. The news articles in this study failed to portray the significance of this issue. This means that Midwesterners aren't getting enough information. If Midwesterners are going to cohabitate with mountain lions, they need to understand why mountain lions are appearing in the area, how they might recolonize and what the potential benefits and dangers will be.

News coverage that fails to put the issue of mountain lion sightings into context will only cast shadows over the issue and make mountain lions even more mysterious than they need to be. It is no great wonder that several news articles gave mention to an urban legend that has become popular in some Midwestern states: the ungrounded theory that the state is intentionally stocking mountain lions. Without a real understanding of the natural forces contributing to the increase in mountain lions, the public's imagination will run wild. The fact that this myth has become popular serves as proof that Midwesterners need better information about mountain lions.

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