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INTERVIEWEE: Monica Morrison

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:01] Well, good morning. I am David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Monica Morrison.

David Todd [00:00:09] And, with her permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is based at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:00:35] And, right here, we want to emphasize that she would have all rights to use the recording as she sees fit as well. It is hers.

David Todd [00:00:44] And, I just wanted to make sure that that's okay with you. That's agreeable.

Monica Morrison [00:00:50] That's fine.

David Todd [00:00:51] Great. Okay.

David Todd [00:00:53] Well, then let's get started.

David Todd [00:00:55] It is Thursday, October 20th, 2022, and it's about 10:10 a.m. Central Time. As I said, my name is David Todd. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin. And we are conducting a remote interview with Mark Morrison, who is based in the Dallas area.

David Todd [00:01:24] So, Ms. Morrison has spent her career working in the field, most recently at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, as a project manager. But she has also been a longtime volunteer in wildlife education and protection. She has worked at the Dallas Zoo, at In Sync Exotics, Wildlife Rescue and Education Center in Wiley, and at the International Exotic Feline Sanctuary in Boyd. In 2017, she formed a non-profit called Texas Native Cats, and more recently got involved in a partnership described as Texans for Mountain Lions.

David Todd [00:02:09] So, today will talk about her life and career, to date, and especially focus on her work with understanding and protecting the mountain lion.

David Todd [00:02:21] So, Monica, I thought we might start by just asking you about any formative experiences that you might have had during your childhood that could have encouraged your interest in wildlife.

Monica Morrison [00:02:36] Well, David, that's a good question. I would say, like most kids, I spent a lot of time outside, playing with my friends, exploring, doing typical kid stuff. Actually, I sometimes felt like I lived outside. My family did have pets. We had dogs, cats and even some horses for a while. So I felt easy around animals and I also felt like I had a connection to them.

Monica Morrison [00:03:00] And this carried over into my adulthood and led to a natural progression of my involvement with wild cats. But I didn't realize it as a kid that's where all this would go.

David Todd [00:03:11] Interesting. So, something was being laid down, but maybe it wasn't entirely obvious.

David Todd [00:03:18] Were there any friends or family in that circle of life, when you were a kid, who might have had an interest in the outdoors or wildlife, that you watched and paid attention to?

Monica Morrison [00:03:35] Honestly, no, not that I can recall.

Monica Morrison [00:03:39] Another thing that comes to mind to is that, when I was going through school, and even through college, a career in wildlife, especially for women, just didn't seem to be in the cards. And I don't remember anybody, either male or female, for that matter, that actually had experiences that led them to become, you know, to develop a career in some form of wildlife issues.

Monica Morrison [00:04:06] When I was a child, and all the way through college and afterward, I really had no inkling at all that I would be in wildlife conservation, and cats in particular. It was really a latent interest.

David Todd [00:04:20] That's, that's fascinating. It's always interesting these kind of interests and skills and aptitudes that lurk deep inside of us and then spring out at some time.

David Todd [00:04:33] So this may go without saying, but I gather that, when you say there wasn't much sort of experience and influence during your early days, that that would include your time at school. And is that the case, or not so much?

Monica Morrison [00:04:57] I guess, you know, to some extent, but not really a lot.

David Todd [00:05:02] Okay. And another sort of probing question here about where folks get started. And, and I've sometimes found that, while they may not have that kind of informal network with their friends and family, or that kind of more formal kind of exposure through their teachers and classmates, that they, people who are in conservation, often do read books, see TV shows, watch movies, you know, experience documentaries, and that that's turned out to be very important for them. Is that true for you, or not so much?

Monica Morrison [00:05:49] Well, I will say, I remember as a, as a child, watching episodes of, I think it was Marlin Perkins' Wild Kingdom. And there, I think there were some others on television as well. But, I don't recall anything specific, and I don't remember anything that was shown about cats. So again, no, I think I was just content to be somewhat of a tomboy, actually, when I was a kid, and spending a lot of time outside and seeing animals, you know, domestic animals, mostly outdoors. But no, I again, I cannot. It's too bad my mom's not still alive,

because I could ask her, "Mom, did I show any interest in wildlife when I was a kid?" But she's no longer here, so I don't remember anything specific, David.

David Todd [00:06:42] Okay. Well, there's so many chapters to life, and sometimes these things, you know, come up later in the plot.

David Todd [00:06:54] So, one of the things I, I understood from just kind of a preliminary introduction to your life, is that you have been a accomplished traveler, and that at one point you visited the Amazon, I think it was about 25 years ago, and that that tour had a really deep effect on your life. Maybe you can tell us more about that.

Monica Morrison [00:07:19] Certainly. I will say it, the trip to the Amazon was my first of many trips to South America, and Brazil in particular. I'd just completed a term paper for a master's course at SMU on the Amazon and the impacts of deforestation. So I really had an interest in visiting this part of Brazil when I was there. And, I did go. And the breadth of the Amazon itself, and the river, are just without comparison, to say nothing of ecological significance. Both play. I will tell you, if you've ever seen the Amazon River, every other river in the world pales, absolutely, in comparison to this gigantic, fantastic river.

Monica Morrison [00:08:05] I was profoundly impacted by the experience. I can honestly say that trip changed my life, although I don't know that I really realized that at the time.

Monica Morrison [00:08:14] And, even though I didn't see any wild cats while I was there, I knew that the Amazon was home to our largest feline species in this hemisphere, the jaguar. But I didn't see any cats there other than domestics.

Monica Morrison [00:08:26] But I returned home determined to do something for wild cats. I was inspired by that trip to do that, and started down my volunteer path by volunteering at the Dallas Zoo, where I ultimately became a tiger docent. And it was the first step that I took that led me to where I am now, which is advocating for our five species of wild cats, past and present, and especially now, our mountain lion.

David Todd [00:08:55] Well, I think we'll probably return to this experience at the Dallas Zoo and your other volunteer work. But, maybe while we're on this topic of travel as an important factor in your life, I'd be curious to hear about some of your other trips. I understand that you visited Kenya at one point, and I thought it was interesting because there, it seems like the local wild cats, the lions and leopards, are given a lot of wide berth and respect because they are the, you know, the basis for a lot of ecotourism and supporting that industry there. And I'm curious if you have any kind of insights from having gone to Kenya and seeing that, about how we look at our own Western, you know, North American lion?

Monica Morrison [00:10:00] Sure. I was in Kenya on an Earthwatch trip, actually, to study African lions and their prey species. And I was fortunate enough - it was my first and only trip to the African continent - I was fortunate enough to see all the iconic African wildlife in those two weeks, except for crocodiles. So I did see lions. I did see leopards, and rhinos, and elephants, and just an amazing array of wildlife. And as an aside, I will say the only time I was concerned about my safety was not due to cats, or any other species, other than cape buffalo. You don't want to find yourself in the middle of a herd of those animals. But I survived, obviously.

Monica Morrison [00:10:43] I believe, I believe the key difference in public attitudes between what's going on in Africa regarding their wildlife, and the U.S. is that African wildlife is viewed as a revenue producer through safaris, scientific charities like Earthwatch, and other ecotourism activities. And ecotourism is well-established in many parts of Africa, although there certainly are some there who view wildlife as pests.

Monica Morrison [00:11:16] Based strictly on my one-time experience, I would say African wildlife is generally reasonably easy to see, especially those that are herd species, or that form some sort of family unit like African lions. I mean, I saw a number of the African lions while I was there, and they were, they were not intimidated by us at all, I would say.

Monica Morrison [00:11:40] Such is not the case with mountain lions, as they are typically a solitary species, at least most of the time. And they're reclusive by nature. Seeing mountain lions in Texas is especially challenging because of the low numbers of them in south Texas, and the rugged terrain in West Texas. And let's not forget, the preponderance of private land ownership in this state, which is estimated somewhere around 95%. Meaning, if you want to see wildlife, mountain lions as well, you may have to be on private land to do that. So that's a difficult step.

David Todd [00:12:20] Well, that's interesting. I love your insights about the difference between attitudes about lions on one continent, and lions on another.

Monica Morrison [00:12:30] And, I'm, I mean, that's my opinion. I'm sure that there are others who have even more reasons to say, well, why the difference. But I would say there that the people have embraced the wild ones they have. At least, that's what I saw in Kenya on this particular trip. I mean, these people obviously, that worked there, at this reserve that I visited, that was there, that was their livelihood. And I will say, they, they seemed to have a real, a real regard for the wildlife. It wasn't just that it was, it was giving them an income. They really felt a relationship with the wildlife there.

David Todd [00:13:18] Interesting.

David Todd [00:13:23] So, you know, I think that some people who go abroad have sort of this, this bifurcated view of it. You know, they go, they do these things. You know, they do like Romans do in Rome. And then they come home and they return to their life, and it's very separate.

David Todd [00:13:44] But, it sounds like you had tried to do some conservation abroad. But, but then it really seems to have kind of turned into an effort to do this kind of work back at home. And I'm wondering how you came to that decision that that, you know, maybe some of your talents and energies were needed here rather than abroad.

Monica Morrison [00:14:13] So, I was involved in a jaguar project in Brazil, and also one in Bolivia. Well, not just jaguars. I mean, it was wildlife in general. I spent, I made several trips to Bolivia, trying to help the situation there.

Monica Morrison [00:14:34] And, on my way home from my last trip to Bolivia, it was most disappointing because I realized, (and, of course, I knew I was an outsider in that country, and I was working with someone there), but nonetheless, I was an outsider. What did I know about Bolivia? How can I relate to what's going on there, all the way down to the economics between our two countries are vastly different.

Monica Morrison [00:15:00] And, I knew that it would be a really big, it was a big challenge for me trying to make a difference in Bolivia. And they have some amazing wildlife there, particularly in terms of cat species. I think they have to my knowledge, they have all the native cat species in South America. So quite an array of cats and other animals as well.

Monica Morrison [00:15:23] Anyway, so I came home, I was, I was really disappointed feeling like, "Okay, I don't know which way to go with this. I don't think I can be effective there." And then all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, it occurred to me, I think I was riding home from the airport, that our cats right here in Texas need help, and that nobody was speaking up for them.

Monica Morrison [00:15:48] And, to this day, as far as I know, I could be incorrect, but as far as I know, there is no other organization in the state that is focused strictly on our wild cats.

Monica Morrison [00:16:00] And, so I thought, all right, then with Texas as my so-called backyard, I felt that I could relate to the politics, the people, the culture, the language, the society and so forth, a lot more than I could in another country. And I could be more effective at home than I could be in another country. And also, our cats needed help.

David Todd [00:16:29] Well, speaking of cats, you know, today I'm hoping that we might focus more on mountain lions, not because the other wildcats in Texas don't deserve attention, but just that it is a deep and complicated subject. So, maybe we can just focus on that one animal, and just ask you how you might have first gotten interested in mountain lions. And so what your starting point might have been.

Monica Morrison [00:17:00] Sure. When I formed the Texas Native Cats, and even before it was formally known as that, I researched, extensively, all five of our native cat species. And I learned so much more about mountain lions in the process, its non-game status, and all the challenges it faces to survive. And I also attended several mountain lion workshops that are held every three years, and that is comprised of primarily wildlife biologists working in Western states, and other places, focused on mountain lions. So I learned from them.

Monica Morrison [00:17:37] I will say I focused on the mountain lion because, all right, we've got three species remaining of our five. Our bobcat is also a non-game species, but it's abundant. And our endangered ocelot has protection and several organizations are working to increase its numbers. But our mountain lion faces incredible odds, surviving with no protection.

Monica Morrison [00:17:58] And also through my volunteer work at two area big cat rescue centers, which you mentioned early on, I came to appreciate this cat even more than I had, and to understand more of its behavior, at least in captivity.

Monica Morrison [00:18:11] And, in the summer of 2020, I decided it was time to launch an effort to help our apex predator.

David Todd [00:18:22] Well, so you mentioned that the mountain lion has this important role as the apex predator. And maybe this would be a good bridge to just talk about the mountain lion's basic life history and its ecological niche. Could you help introduce us to that?

Monica Morrison [00:18:45] Yes. So these cats are the most widely distributed terrestrial mammal in the Western Hemisphere, and they range from Canada to the tip of South America. These cats are very easily adaptable to a range of habitats, as you can well imagine, with that sort of different, or length in their range across so many continents. They're concentrated in the US, mostly in the western US states in this country.

Monica Morrison [00:19:18] Females can breed at any time of the year and usually give birth to between 2 to 4 kittens. And the kittens stay with their moms, until they're about two years old and then they disperse. Mom has had enough of them, and so they're on their own.

Monica Morrison [00:19:33] The males have a much wider dispersal range than females do. And not just in Texas. That's everywhere.

Monica Morrison [00:19:41] Their diet consists of both mule and white-tailed deer, javelina, some feral hogs and other mammals. And, I will say cattle are seldom part of their diet. Frankly, cattle are just they're too big. A male or a cow, a steer and a cow, are just too large for a mountain lion to take down.

Monica Morrison [00:20:03] Now, if we had jaguars here, which we had at one time, that's another story, because jaguars can take down cattle. We no longer have those cats.

Monica Morrison [00:20:12] The adult males, mountain lions in Texas, weigh somewhere, usually between 110 to 175 pounds. They are usually smaller here in Texas than in, say, the Western states, I think primarily due to habitat. You know, let's face it. There's a lot of difference between our dry arid west Texas areas, than there is in some of the mountain states, that are mountainous, that have a lot of cold weather, so the cats have to be bigger there than they are here.

Monica Morrison [00:20:44] The females typically weigh less, and that's true of all cat species.

Monica Morrison [00:20:48] And the average span, lifespan, of wild mountain lion is about 12 years, though in Texas it's probably less than that. But we don't really know by how much.

Monica Morrison [00:21:01] I will say also that the mountain lion is the second largest cat in the Western Hemisphere after the jaguar, but it is not considered a true big cat, like a jaguar is.

Monica Morrison [00:21:14] As an apex predator, these cats or mountain lions, help to regulate lower species like deer and others by keeping them from proliferating. And their kills also provide food for other species such as coyotes, vultures, and even all the way down to insects.

Monica Morrison [00:21:31] So, they provide a lot of service to us.

David Todd [00:21:37] You know, one of the things I thought was interesting, and this may be something that we could discuss later, or we can maybe talk about it now. But, I think that it's intriguing that, you know, you mention regulating prey species. And there are some, you know, prey animals that have become a nuisance or have become a disease threat. And I'm thinking here about the feral hog, which is running amok in the state, and then also this

growing problem with deer that have chronic wasting disease. And I'm curious if you're seeing that the mountain lion has a benefit there in controlling those two problems?

Monica Morrison [00:22:24] I will say it does. There is a benefit. There was a study done in the Davis mountains of West Texas, a ten-year study that concluded several years ago, that found that feral hogs comprised 10% of lions' diet in that particular study, although deer made up most of their intake.

Monica Morrison [00:22:46] Though I know of no statistics regarding deer with chronic wasting disease consumed by mountain lions, we now know that they will kill these animals. And yet, interestingly enough, they don't develop the disease themselves. So frankly, in my opinion, they're providing a service to these unfortunate diseased deer by removing them from the landscape, as this disease is highly contagious to other deer.

Monica Morrison [00:23:11] And mountain lions, as I said, are not usually capable of taking down cows or steers, because they're too big. But they can kill calves, and they can kill sheep and goats.

David Todd [00:23:23] Okay. And, you know, I think in the past, when there was a pretty significant sheep and goat industry in West Texas in particular, and also in South Texas, mountain lions were seen as a real nemesis for some of those livestock operators. Do you think that there's good reason for that, or what's your view of the lion risk to those two animals?

Monica Morrison [00:23:58] Oh, I think it's, there is probably a decent foundation in belief that that's true. Mountain lions have been known to, and this isn't just in Texas, this is in general, they will just find a herd of either one of those mammals and just have a field day with them. I mean, they'll kill a number of them, but they don't, they don't consume them. They might consume one. But it's ... I liken it somewhat to watching a cat, a domestic cat, play. And you give it some toys. And what is it going to do? I mean, it's going to go in and bat them all around, as many as it has, and have a good, fun time. And that's why the mountain lions seem to be with sheep and goats. So, yes, they can be a formidable threat to those species.

David Todd [00:24:48] Okay. Well, I think one other thing that would be good to know about the mountain lion population in Texas is just what the trends have been for the counts and for their range. What can you tell us about that?

Monica Morrison [00:25:13] Well, considering their overall range, and that's just outside of Texas, I mean, just in general, they are expanding eastward into their former range, all the way, at some points, even back to the East. The Dakotas have a small resident lion population now, as does Nebraska. And so these cats are increasingly being seen even farther east than that, though, most of the time the cats have been male.

Monica Morrison [00:25:38] As for Texas, there is no panther population estimate. But, there has been no statewide survey of the cats.

Monica Morrison [00:25:46] We do know their primary habitat is in west and south Texas. The trend, especially in South Texas, is declining, declining by around 50%. And in west Texas, these cats are subject to heavy trapping. But again, there's, it's very hard to quantify numbers or specific habitat areas, other than those two I mentioned, just because, again, there has not been the research done on any widespread basis to know.

David Todd [00:26:20] Well, I understand that the survival rate has been low in Texas for those mountain lions that have been studied. Can you give us an idea of what the threats are to the mountain lion these days and why it's challenged?

Monica Morrison [00:26:41] Well, again, going back to that Davis Mountains study that was done, they showed an annual survival rate of 55% of the cats in the study, which is frankly low in comparison to other states' survival rates. Trapping in West Texas and habitat fragmentation in South Texas are two of the key components that are believed to cause survival problems for these animals.

Monica Morrison [00:27:07] Well, there does seem to be some trophy hunting, you don't hear a whole lot about it, because there's no requirement in Texas to report any cats that have been killed, regardless of what the means is. So, much of what we know, for instance, about trophy hunting is anecdotal. I mean, you'll see a post on Facebook, for instance, but again, it doesn't have to be reported.

Monica Morrison [00:27:32] The same goes for killing contests. We know that sometimes mountain lions are targets in killing contests. But again, nothing has to be reported because they're a non-game animal.

David Todd [00:27:44] Do you see much role for mountain lions in some of the canned hunts that are at times held in the state?

Monica Morrison [00:27:54] There has been. And it's interesting you mention that because that is one of our six petition points, is to ban canned hunts of mountain lions in Texas. My understanding is, and again, mind you, this is anecdotal, that there's very little of that going on anymore. But the fact is, it is allowable. And that's a loophole that we would like to see closed.

David Todd [00:28:22] Okay.

David Todd [00:28:23] So, something that I think you mentioned several times, and it sort of stuck in my ear, is that there seems to be not a lot of research in Texas about mountain lions, maybe just, you know, on, over a broad range or over a long timeline. Is that true? And, if so, you know, what are some of the reasons for that and what might be some of the consequences?

Monica Morrison [00:28:58] I would say yes. I would say right now that what I would classify as research in this state, and there has been some, as limited. There have been at least two South Texas studies over the years, going back to the nineties, and two in West Texas.

Monica Morrison [00:29:15] But I'm not a scientist, but I really doubt - this is going back to your question of why is this - I doubt there's been much research in Texas on any non-game species, and that could be bobcats or coyotes or armadillos. There's a whole host of animals classified that way in Texas. Unless the situation with any of these non-game species becomes apparent that they're in peril, like a mountain lion, or they're so prolific that they're causing problems, then I think, frankly, my opinion is they're given very little thought by anybody.

Monica Morrison [00:29:48] With our mountain lion, the impact of limited research, coupled with no regulations on them, is that we don't have an estimate on population size, how the

cats in West Texas persist, or how much of an impact fragmentation has on them, but we do know they're in trouble.

David Todd [00:30:05] That's really interesting. So I gather that there is a lot of research on animals such as white-tailed deer, or bobwhite quail, or ducks or geese that are game animals. But you think that the mountain lion doesn't rise to that level because their regulatory status is different?

Monica Morrison [00:30:33] I do. I do. And I think there's perhaps also coupled with that, the attitude of some people, "let's just leave well enough alone. Let's not go and investigate. There's no need for it."

Monica Morrison [00:30:47] But again, I think it's and again, the other, the other factor is, David, is that, and this has become abundantly clear to me over the years, is that the people that I talk to about, let's just say, a mountain lion, and I will say these are people in urban areas that I present to, know absolutely next to nothing about mountain lions. They do know that they exist in the state, most of them do. But the vast majority had no idea that they have no protection at all, they can be hunted, they can be trapped. You know, there's no reporting and so on.

Monica Morrison [00:31:24] So, it's a real, there's a real education opportunity here to get people to understand what's going on with these cats. And I think, again, you know, if, once people know what the situation is, I mean, they're educated, that to me is a first step in making a change, whether it's mountain lions, or the cost of living, or you name it. But if people don't know about it, they're not going to be, they're not going to pursue it, because they don't know.

David Todd [00:31:55] Right. You know, you seem like the, the exception to the rule of people not really being familiar with mountain lions, and maybe wildlife in general. And I guess part of the reason for that is that you've had this sort of hands-on, in-person experience of volunteering at wildlife sanctuaries - the In-Sync Exotics, Wildlife Rescue and Education Center in Wiley, and then the International Exotic Feline Sanctuary in Boyd. And I thought it might help us understand more about you, and what you've managed to learn about these lions, to know more about those, those two sanctuaries where you worked, and what your role there might have been.

Monica Morrison [00:32:52] Certainly, I will say that, yes, it did give me a lot of insight. And I will also add that both of those sanctuaries, those rescue centers, are reputable institutions. The fortunate rescues end up at a place like In-Sync, or what was the International Exotic Feline Sanctuary (it's changed names now). There are a lot of organizations that call themselves rescue centers that are frankly not. But these two are very, very reputable.

Monica Morrison [00:33:22] I started volunteering at the rescue in Boyd, the one that was called International Exotic Feline Sanctuary after a volunteer stint at the Dallas Zoo for several years. That's where I got my start after I came back from my, my fateful trip to the Amazon.

Monica Morrison [00:33:38] I knew that I wanted to work more closely with cats, and so I spent several years there at the rescue center in Boyd. Overall, it was an amazing experience. I, I ended up being a substitute for the director when he was gone. So I was actually managing the facility in his absence. I fed cats. I cleaned their enclosures. I gave tours. I built enclosures. I served as a volunteer coordinator.

Monica Morrison [00:34:06] And I have to say, one of the most gratifying, amazing experiences I had there, took four years, but was finally being accepted by an enormous African male lion named Rhino. He was appropriately named. This cat weighed about 700 pounds. And it took, as I said, almost four years. But he finally began to approach me in a friendly manner. Of course, he was in his enclosure, I was not with him, but in his enclosure when he saw me come near. And the first time that happened, I was just stunned that here was this animal that had always snarled at me. And all of a sudden he changed his mind. And I was, I was a good person to him. That was so amazing to connect with that animal that way.

Monica Morrison [00:34:55] At In-Sync, I performed a lot of the same duties, though it was mostly centered around cleaning and construction. But at some point at In-Sync I realized I wanted to help wild cats stay in the wild, because that's where they belong. They don't belong cooped up, even in really good facilities like those two.

David Todd [00:35:17] That's interesting. So, the animal, you know, can pursue a safe and healthy life in a cage or some sort of enclosure, but I think from what I'm hearing you say, you think that it needs to be, at least in the mountain lion's case, out in the wild, you know, leading a more normal life. Is that what you're saying?

Monica Morrison [00:35:45] Absolutely. And I I say that about all wildlife, frankly, although I will say, obviously, organizations like zoos, and even these rescue centers, introduce wildlife to people that probably otherwise would never see them in the wild. So they do serve a purpose in that way.

Monica Morrison [00:36:03] But the animals, I think, just like people, are not meant to live cooped up in cages. And of course, once they become habituated to people like that, much less if they're not a native species, you could never release them. So they live out their lives in those places. But again, it's like, why is this even allowed in the first place, to have, to allow people to have wild animals like a lion or a tiger or whatever it happens to be.

Monica Morrison [00:36:36] So, yes, I think they belong in the wild.

David Todd [00:36:41] And, I think you're just talking about the dilemmas of having mountain lions in captivity, you know, at very reputable, respectable places like Dallas Zoo, or In-Sync, the International Exotic Feline Sanctuary.

David Todd [00:36:58] But I'm curious what your view is of this this kind of odd, I guess I might say, tradition of people keeping mountain lions as pets, or guard animals and the support that they get from the trade in those, in those kind of domestic trades of those animals.

Monica Morrison [00:37:24] Well, I will say, mountain lions, or any other cat species, particularly, even those born and raised in captivity, are still wild animals and they don't make good pets. Just to give you some background on what it takes to maintain an animal like that, a mountain lion or any other large cat: a decent enclosure, a well-built one, well-constructed, safe for a big cat (this was years ago when I was out at the Boyd Sanctuary), it was about \$10,000, and it's probably higher than that today with the cost of materials having gone up.

Monica Morrison [00:38:04] And, the food bill is equally expensive, because cats have to eat meat. They are what scientists call, "obligate carnivores". They've got to eat beef, meat, in order to survive and thrive.

Monica Morrison [00:38:14] And, then their vet bills, assuming these people that have them as pets, can find a vet willing to treat a wild animal.

Monica Morrison [00:38:21] And, I will say, so many of these rescued cats, all of them, have come from absolutely horrific and inhumane conditions. That affects them for the remainder of their lives. The lucky ones, as I say, go to a good place, like those you mentioned.

Monica Morrison [00:38:40] Many states in this country prohibit the ownership of exotic, wild cats and other wildlife. And frankly, I think the same needs to happen here in Texas. And those animals that remain should be moved to reputable facilities, again, to live out their lives. But again, just this wild animal ownership has to, has to be stopped.

Monica Morrison [00:39:02] It's also dangerous, of course. You may recall - this was several years ago, I think, in Ohio - there, and I can't remember all the details now, but there was a man that had a number of wild cats and I think some others, animals like chimps, maybe. And they got out. And then he started, a lot of them got out, and he started letting all of them out. They were all shot to death by authorities because they didn't know what else to do, through absolutely no fault of their own.

Monica Morrison [00:39:30] But they are dangerous. I will tell you, watching these cats, again, the big cats in particular, you know, you're safely outside their enclosure watching them inside their enclosure. And if you're perceptive, you watch their habits, and you know what to look for, right before they're getting ready to strike, if they could, you'll see a change in their eyes, maybe a change in their ears. And then, you know, boom, they are at that fence. And there's no way that we as humans have that ability to move like they do and get out of the way.

Monica Morrison [00:40:13] So, you know, if there weren't that fence between you, you could very well end up being injured very badly, or killed by these cats. So they are a danger.

David Todd [00:40:25] So, did I hear you say that in some states, having these animals in private captivity is illegal? But, but maybe it's not regulated in Texas. Is that right?

Monica Morrison [00:40:41] It's not really regulated. I mean, there is what's called the Dangerous Wild Animals Act in Texas, that was passed, my goodness, probably at least 20 years ago. And, that does not prohibit the ownership of exotic, wild animals like jaguars, or mountain lions, or wolves, other species. But what it does is it sets certain parameters on what's allowable in terms of enclosures and insurance and so forth.

Monica Morrison [00:41:15] The Legislature left this up to the counties to determine how to implement this. And most counties across the state say that they don't allow wild animal ownership, but in fact, it exists. It exists. And I think part of the problem, too, is having simply the manpower in some of these, many of these, counties in the state, to be able to go and confirm if people have wild animals on their property.

Monica Morrison [00:41:50] But, no, it's, it's still not illegal to own them here.

David Todd [00:41:55] That's striking.

David Todd [00:41:58] So I think you said earlier that one of the needs that you recognize is that much of the public isn't really aware of mountain lions' behavior, and needs, and their status. And, that you have, as a consequence, been spending time at the Heard Museum and in other ways making mountain lion presentations. And I'm curious how that started and, you know, what your experience has been giving those talks and seminars, workshops and so on.

Monica Morrison [00:42:41] It started out really as just a spur-of-the-moment decision on my part. I'd already, of course, been volunteering at these rescue centers that we talked about and had, you know, some wildlife experience in the wild. But I was at an event, or actually an educational presentation, at the Heard Museum, the museum up in McKinney. And after it was over, I was talking to a member of the museum, and I just, really out of the blue, I asked this woman if she'd be interested in a presentation on Texas mountain lions.

Monica Morrison [00:43:20] I remember distinctly her face lit up and she says, "Yes, absolutely."

Monica Morrison [00:43:24] And I remember thinking at the time, "Oh my goodness, what have I done?" Because I had, thankfully, I had months to prepare for this. And I did a lot of research, months' and months' and months' worth, on mountain lions, just in general, and then in Texas.

Monica Morrison [00:43:40] And, at that point, I really I was not "Texas Native Cats". I was just Monica Morrison. And, but, that's, that first presentation, how that came about? I think that was in 2016. And that's, that's how Texas Native Cats ultimately got its start.

David Todd [00:43:57] Well, and let's, let's talk about that. Texas Native Cats is a non-profit that provides education and outreach advocacy for Texas wild cats. How did that begin? And what's sort of the scope and goal of the activities that that this group has?

Monica Morrison [00:44:21] It was a natural progression, I'd say. David, it's, I don't know how to define it other than that. Starting, honestly, with that very first trip to the Amazon, that I told you about, and my volunteer work at the zoo and the other rescue centers, participating in cat research trips and helping researchers, etc.

Monica Morrison [00:44:39] And, again, I realized that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody else was doing anything specifically to help our cats in Texas. So I was trying to come up with an appropriate name for what I wanted to do, and got some input from some people whose opinions I respected. And I said, okay, "Texas Native Cats", it is.

Monica Morrison [00:45:02] So, that's how it got started. And that was in 2017. We incorporated in that year and then we just, we are a fiscally-sponsored 501(c)(3) organization now. So, and that's just as of May of this year, so now we are officially non-profit.

Monica Morrison [00:45:20] But again, I just decided it was time to launch that and let's start focusing on our cats. And at the time it wasn't even just strictly the mountain lion, but those were the bulk of my initial presentations were on the mountain lion, for Texas Native Cats. And still to this day.

David Todd [00:45:41] Maybe you can give us an example of what a typical outreach session might be for Texas Native Cats, when you come to talk to the public about mountain lions. How does that happen and what do you what do you tend to talk about?

Monica Morrison [00:45:56] Well, I would say there are two types. For instance, I'll give you an example. One I did last weekend at Plano International Festival and Texas Native Cats had a table there, some volunteers. And, all day long, it was talking about our mountain lions specifically, and handing out information, answering questions. And again, going back to what I said a little earlier, people don't know about this cat. They don't have any inkling of it. And when I tell them what goes on, they are, they're stunned.

Monica Morrison [00:46:27] So, but that's pretty much you know, those are quick conversations, generally. I mean, maybe a few minutes at the most. And then they move on, and somebody else comes up, and you repeat the whole thing. But, it's serving a purpose of getting knowledge out there before people.

Monica Morrison [00:46:43] Now, on a more detailed basis, I give what I call, "presentations". And these are, well, these days, of course, and for some time, they've been virtual, but I do them sometimes in person as well. And that's with a PowerPoint presentation.

Monica Morrison [00:46:56] And, I will, again, I focused specifically on our mountain lion the last few years, for the most part. And, I just tell them what's going on, and what the situation is, and the classification, and all the difficulties these cats face.

Monica Morrison [00:47:11] I will say, a lot of my audiences are Texas Master Naturalists. I'm one myself. And, the Master Naturalists have been a great audience, not just in terms of their eagerness to know more, but just because of the type of role that Master Naturalists play in the state.

Monica Morrison [00:47:31] But I've given presentations to garden clubs. I've given them to schools. I will say one of the most probably to this day, the most amazing presentation I gave, was several years ago, to a bunch of kids at a day camp, a wildlife day camp at one of our Audubon Centers here in the area. And the kids ranged in age from 6 to 11. And I remember thinking at the time, oh, my goodness, how do I make a presentation to such a wide age range, knowing there's a whole lot of difference between what a six year old comprehends, versus an 11 year old?

Monica Morrison [00:48:15] So, I went in not really expecting anything great come of this and I was floored by these kids. Not only could they tell me ... I play, I usually play some audio clips of cat sounds, including a mountain lion. And these kids could tell me, not only was it a big cat or a small cat, they could tell me which cat it was. And they knew all about fragmented habitat and the dangers that these cats face. And I was, I thought, my goodness, if everybody were as knowledgeable as these kids are, we could very well have been on our way to a change several years ago.

Monica Morrison [00:48:58] Why, I still, and still just, to this day, that was the best audience, most knowledgeable audience I've ever had - those little kids.

David Todd [00:49:08] You know, I think you mentioned that a lot of the public is not terrifically familiar with the mountain lion's situation. I'm curious if you ever run across folks

who are indeed quite familiar, but resistant to the message of conservation that you try to bring.

Monica Morrison [00:49:35] Well, that's an interesting question. I can't really say that I have encountered people like that. I know they're out there, certainly. Understand, again, that my audience is urban. I'm not out talking to ranchers, or farmers, or people out in rural areas. I'm targeting cities in my work. And, I'm sure, I know, in those areas you'll certainly find some that don't think these cats need any assistance at all.

Monica Morrison [00:50:07] But the city folks are a different matter. They, they understand. And so, I tell them what's going on. So they're, they're my focus.

David Todd [00:50:16] Yeah. You know, another group that I understand that you've been involved with, in addition to this organization, Texas Native Cats, is, I guess, sort of a federation of advocates that I believe you've called, "Texans for Mountain Lions". And, um, tell me about the group, and why you joined, and what the goal is for that group of people.

Monica Morrison [00:50:51] Certainly. So in May of last year, I formed a group of interested and concerned experts to determine how best to help our beleaguered mountain lion. And at that point, and still to this day, we just kind of informally call ourselves, "the working group". We continue to meet regularly and monthly. And in May of this year, we created what we're calling, "Texans for Mountain Lions". And Texas Native Cats is a, we call ourselves a coalition member of this group.

Monica Morrison [00:51:24] We submitted a petition for rulemaking change to Texas Parks and Wildlife (also, I just use the acronym TPWD), for our mountain lion. And our members include two wildlife biologists, a filmmaker, conservation advocates, a landowner and a wildlife veterinarian. And even though TPWD denied our petition, Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission directed the agency to form a stakeholder group, advisory group, as soon as possible at their open hearing meeting in, on August 25th, 24th and 25th.

Monica Morrison [00:52:00] And, we believe that a science-based approach to mountain lions is required in Texas to ensure their survival. So our work continues. We believe that our efforts will take, likely, several years, but we are determined to see this through and see a change for our cat.

Monica Morrison [00:52:22] I think it's interesting that you bring different perspectives to this coalition. You know, from, I think you mentioned, biologist, and veterinarian, landowner. What do you feel each person, each representative, you might say, brings to the coalition?

Monica Morrison [00:52:44] Everybody has a different background and somewhat different perspectives. The wildlife biologists have been invaluable because of their knowledge, their first-hand knowledge of the cats. This is what they study. And, we have to have the science. Again, we are focused on a science-based future for this cat. So, they're invaluable.

Monica Morrison [00:53:14] A landowner - I think that one kind of speaks for itself. Mountain lions live on private land, primarily. And this person has a perspective that others in the group don't have, because of land ownership.

Monica Morrison [00:53:32] The wildlife vet, of course, is seeing it more from, I guess ... and he's also got mountain lion research, as well, in his experience. So he brings the view from,

"Okay, what does it mean from a veterinary standpoint?" - some of the things like, for instance, trapping, and what happens when an animal is left to die in a trap? What is that? What is that picture?

Monica Morrison [00:54:04] And then, others, like the filmmaker, the conservation advocates, they've got different perspectives. Like our filmmaker, Ben Masters, has made a number of wildlife films, including just this year released, "Deep in the Heart", which was a fantastic tribute to the diversity of our wildlife in the state and the ecosystems that support it, including our mountain lion. So, he is out there in the field making films on these animals.

Monica Morrison [00:54:36] And then, the others, the other advocates, again, they have connections with some of the folks that we need to be engaging with. And so, that's also been extremely helpful.

Monica Morrison [00:54:47] So, we all bring something slightly different to the table.

Monica Morrison [00:54:52] And, for me, I see, "Okay, I am the urban representative here", although some of our other folks also live in urban areas. But I view it from the standpoint of, as I told the agency one time, the 85% of us that live in the cities in the state.

Monica Morrison [00:55:10] So we all bring, we all have unique value that we, that we provide.

David Todd [00:55:16] Yeah. You know, you mentioned Ben Masters, and through his documentary film organization, and I guess they've also produced books, "Fin and Fur", they released, recently, a short doc called, "Lions of West Texas". And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that film as far as you're aware of it?

Monica Morrison [00:55:46] Oh, I'm very aware of it. I can't tell you how many times I've shown that film to, at presentations that I make, kind of as a finale. So, Ben produced that film about five years ago, and it covers a ten-year research project that Patricia Harveson and her team made, that they conducted in West Texas on mountain lions. At the time, she was a professor at Sul Ross University, Borderlands Research Institute. She has since retired from that.

Monica Morrison [00:56:16] The film discusses the lives and perils of the cats in the study, including their diet, their range, mothers and kittens, and their mortality factors. An interesting note in that film, well, there were several, but I would say an interesting note in there, when they did a survey of the remains of mountain lion kills, there was no livestock that were killed, that were part of their diet.

Monica Morrison [00:56:44] Not to say, again, that they don't kill livestock. But, you know, these cats, given their, given their options, would prefer, primarily, deer species, rather than some sort of livestock.

David Todd [00:57:00] That's interesting because I guess part of their, the sort of attitude, culturally at least, and maybe in the government, too, has been based on their impact on livestock, from what I've heard. Why do you think there's this, this disconnect between the science of mountain lions actually eat and this fear or revulsion, or antagonism towards mountain lions among some of the livestock operators?

Monica Morrison [00:57:39] Well, I think it could be a variety of things. And again, this is just my perception. I can't say at this point that I've had much in the way of conversations with livestock owners, other than there was one that spoke to us here a while back. Some of the other members in the coalition have had conversations with these folks.

Monica Morrison [00:57:57] I think, I think there is certainly some truth to their concern about depredation caused by mountain lions on their livestock. Again, mostly deer, I'm sorry, mostly sheep and goats.

Monica Morrison [00:58:15] But one of the other factors, and this was something that we learned, I guess, it was earlier this year. A lot of landowners make sometimes significant part of their revenue from hunting leases. And the hunting leases very often are for deer, mule deer, primarily, of course, in West Texas. And the concern is that the mountain lions will kill the prize bucks that the hunters want to go and shoot. So there's a concern about that, because it obviously would affect the bottom line if, in fact, there aren't these bucks on their property still.

Monica Morrison [00:58:55] Now, the fact is, a mountain lion typically only makes a kill maybe every seven days or so, and they only make one kill, if it's deer. So we're not talking huge numbers here. I think some of it is just a perception to, of, the status quo that nobody, I mean, that landowners and some others have never had to contend with regulations regarding mountain lions. So they're accustomed to doing things the way they've always done them. And let's face it, nobody, people, just in general, you know, we tend to, we tend to look down on change. We're afraid of change. We don't like it. We don't like being told what to do.

Monica Morrison [00:59:49] So, I think it's an attitude in some cases. And in some cases, there is, I guess, some degree of justification in what their concern is about maintaining the prey species on their lands for an income purpose. It's a slow change that will have to happen. It's a long answer to your question.

David Todd [01:00:12] Well, it's, it's, it's a fascinating issue. You know, it seems like y'all are trying to do this in a very scientific, fact-based way, but it sounds like you're confronting a lot of pretty deep-seated sociology, and culture and, you know, attitudes that are, that are maybe generations old. It's sort of apples and oranges, it seems to me.

Monica Morrison [01:00:41] True. I would agree. I would agree.

David Todd [01:00:47] Well. So we talked about some of these educational groups that you've been active with, whether it's the Heard Museum, or Texas Native Cats, or Texans for Mountain Lions, or the filmmaking that you've been able to use from Ben Masters. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about why you feel there's this need to speak out. And, I think that when we talked before, sort off and outside of this recording, you mentioned, "Lauren". Can you tell us about Lauren, and why she is important to you?

Monica Morrison [01:01:27] Sure. So, Lauren, I named her after a friend of mine. Lauren is a full-size mountain lion cutout. At some point, I will get a taxidermied mountain lion, perhaps, if I can figure out where the heck to store it, because I will tell you at that outreach events, there is nothing better than a taxidermied cat. Like, I have a taxidermied bobcat and it is a magnet.

Monica Morrison [01:01:51] But Lauren is my second best to do that, to having a taxidermy at this point. And so Lauren is full-size, as I said, and she sits behind me and peers over my shoulder as I'm sitting here on my computer, which I am part of the day. And, you know, at times, if I'm feeling frustrated, or I have moments of hesitation, whatever it is, I turn around and I look at that cat and she looks back at me and I say, "Okay, okay, I'm back on it. Don't worry, I'm not giving up on any of this right now."

Monica Morrison [01:02:23] So she is truly part of my inspiration for doing this. She keeps me focused.

David Todd [01:02:31] Well, it's an interesting thing, because I guess wildlife is silent, at least in the halls of power. And, it's, it's interesting when there are people like yourself that somehow feel dubbed to be their representative.

David Todd [01:02:58] Any thoughts about why Lauren might need you or want you to be there as her spokesperson?

Monica Morrison [01:03:09] I would say that, yes, that, our cat needs change. I think our cat needs to survive. And, as I say, to me, she's, she's just one representative of what I feel is so important in working toward a change for our mountain lion in the state. So, she, as I say, she is, she's part of my motivation here.

David Todd [01:03:40] Yeah. You know, it's interesting. I think your, your motivations are different from a lot of people. I, I think most people, and I hope I'm not reading too much into this, but they do things because they're paid to do them. And that's their, their official job. You know, it gives them a livelihood. It pays their mortgage, and car note, and all those things. But, you have really poured a lot of effort and time, resources, into volunteering. And, and I'm wondering if you could talk about what sort of leads you to do things in an altruistic way.

Monica Morrison [01:04:32] Bottom line is, David, I want to make a difference. I know we hear that from a lot of people, and different ways of approaching that. But for me, this is what, what drives me right now. And I will tell you, I sometimes jokingly tell people I should go back to my day job that I had, because, frankly, I don't think I worked as hard at that as I am with, with this non-paying cat job.

Monica Morrison [01:05:01] But, as I said, our cat needs a change in this state. The cat needs to survive. And this, this question, or questions, of why? Why not? Why not me? Why not now? That's what has, that has, that's what has pushed me.

Monica Morrison [01:05:21] Frankly, it's time to manage mountain lions in Texas, and I want to see this through to the end, whatever the end ends up being.

David Todd [01:05:30] Well. So, maybe we can talk a little bit about the management goals that, that I think you have. You say it's, it's the time. This is the opportunity. I believe that the mountain lion is classified as an S2 animal in the state, which I guess is shorthand for imperiled / threatened. But, on the other hand, it is regulated as a non-game animal. And, can you sort of interpret that for us, what it means to be S2, what it means to be non-game, and maybe why there seems to be such a difference in those two statuses.

Monica Morrison [01:06:19] So, S2, it's actually S2/S1, it's kind of a combined rating that Texas Parks and Wildlife assigned to this cat. And it translates into S2, meaning, "imperiled",

and S1 meaning, "threatened". It is a contradiction. And when, when that fact hit me several years ago, when I was doing this research, I thought, how in the world can we have a species that has no protection, is classified as non-game, and yet we realize that it's in trouble by this classification of the status of S2/S1?

Monica Morrison [01:06:54] I think most people don't know about it, as I said before, in the state. And there are always those in any situation, whether it's this one or really anything else in life, that have a vested interest in the status quo. Some people in the state don't want to see a change for this cat. And a lot of those people are very influential folks, at least in terms of, of Texas Parks and Wildlife.

Monica Morrison [01:07:19] I do believe the majority of people in Texas feel otherwise, however.

Monica Morrison [01:07:25] Texas Native Cats worked with Texas A&M on a recent attitude survey across the state - a variety of stakeholders, rural, urban landowners, hunters, and a multitude of questions - asking about their attitudes toward mountain lions. And the results showed, among many things, but it did show the vast majority, 70% or higher of Texans, believe that efforts should be made to ensure the survival of this cat, and that scientific studies would yield valuable information, and that lions are an essential part of nature.

Monica Morrison [01:08:05] And again, those responses came from across the board. So it's, it's an effort that we think needs to be made, and it's an effort to show that everybody's voice counts, not just the voice of certain stakeholders in this issue. Because wildlife belongs to everybody. Wildlife is does not belong to any one individual or individuals.

David Todd [01:08:42] I'm probably as naive as a lot of the folks that you've been teaching. And, I was hoping that you could enlighten me a little bit. You mentioned earlier that the mountain lion is considered a non-game animal in the state. And what does that mean as far as hunting, and trapping, and trap check times, and population estimates, and harvest reports, and all the features of how the state might regulate, or not regulate, an animal.

Monica Morrison [01:09:23] So, "non-game species" in Texas means, again, no protection. There's no limit on hunting. There's no limit on trapping. There is no required trap check time. Any mountain lion that's killed does not have to be reported, which, you know, you start putting all that together and you can quickly see how it is that we really don't know a lot about this animal in Texas, because the tools that would be there to develop a good picture of this cat are just simply not in place.

Monica Morrison [01:10:01] So, we, as I said, we submitted this petition to counter some of those current regulations that are in place as a non-game species. So we'll see what comes out of that.

David Todd [01:10:17] Yeah. Well, how about if you tell us about this? I think you mentioned that back in August of 2022, you came to what I think is affectionately known as "open mic day" at Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission hearing. And you promoted some revisions to how mountain lions are managed in Texas and it'd be great to hear, A), what you were asking for, and then B), you know, what sort of response you heard from either other members of the public who were there, or from the Commission and their staff.

Monica Morrison [01:11:00] So, in June of this year, Texans for Mountain Lions submitted a petition for rulemaking change to Texas Parks and Wildlife that contained six different elements - the ban on canned trapping of mountain lions, mandatory trap check times of 36 hours, which is consistent with furbearer regulations in the state, harvest reporting of any cat that is killed, statewide study of mountain lions' management by region for mountain lions, and I'm omitting one off the top of my head here. All right. I'll come back to it.

David Todd [01:11:44] Did you want meetings about these animals, is that right?

Monica Morrison [01:11:50] Yes, of course - the Stakeholder Advisory Group. Thank you for that. Yes. One of the key issues here.

Monica Morrison [01:11:56] As it turned out, Texas Parks and Wildlife denied our petition, although they did see the value in convening a stakeholder advisory group. And in August of every year, Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, which provides regulatory background for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, has what's called an open hearing, open public hearing. And anybody that wants to talk about a wildlife issue in the state that comes under the jurisdiction of the Commission can go before the Commission and speak for two minutes about the topic.

Monica Morrison [01:12:30] So, about 20 of us, as I recall, went to Austin and spoke for about two minutes on behalf of our cat - different facets, different perspectives. And there were some who voiced opposition to it, maybe around, I think, around six or seven. I'm not exactly sure of the number.

Monica Morrison [01:12:53] And then the upshot of it was the next day, a member of Texas Parks and Wildlife made a presentation to the Commission on our cat, and essentially said most of the same things we had said the day before, but it came from the agency rather than from outsiders.

Monica Morrison [01:13:13] And the upshot of that was that the Commission directed Texas Parks and Wildlife to convene this stakeholder advisory group as soon as possible. And we are still waiting on the notification that that is ready to go, it's ready to be convened. We do understand that there is work going on behind the scenes, but at this point we're still waiting to hear when that will take place.

Monica Morrison [01:13:41] And my understanding is, is that it will be a cross-section of stakeholders, of advocates and probably some opponents. It will have landowners, rural people, urban residents, so forth. Because really and that's, that's really the way to conduct this. You've got to get people at a table and you've got to get them talking to each other. Any time you have opposing viewpoints, I mean, hopefully people can set aside the emotion, and realize that we're not trying to damage anybody's livelihood, but that this cat does need help. Then, hopefully we'll be able to come to some sort of agreements that will mean a change for our cat.

Monica Morrison [01:14:34] What that ultimately will look like, we have no idea. In my viewpoint, and I think the viewpoint of Texans for Mountain Lions, compromise all the way around will surely be an aspect of this, whatever, whatever the ultimate outcome is.

Monica Morrison [01:14:49] So, we are hopeful and we are waiting for notification of this stakeholder group to be convened.

David Todd [01:14:57] You know, I've heard that in some states that have had predator releases, the state reimburses, they give restitution, if you show that a wolf, for instance, has taken one of your livestock, maybe that includes wild animals like deer, too. I'm curious if that would be one way to sort of mitigate the opposition to changing the non-game status for mountain lions. What's your thought there?

Monica Morrison [01:15:31] It's an interesting question, David.

Monica Morrison [01:15:34] To my knowledge of regulations in other states that have a resident mountain lion population, only a couple of them offer any kind of depredation compensation due to, it's livestock that has been killed by mountain lions. Interestingly enough, that was a question on this attitude survey that I told you we worked with Texas A&M on. I don't remember the percentage, but I remember that the positive response toward this with this answer and this question was a lot higher than I would have thought it would be.

Monica Morrison [01:16:14] I remember from some of these mountain lion workshops that I've attended, that question comes up, and I remember hearing from one of them that a landowner said that sometimes it's treated almost as an embarrassment to ask for livestock compensation, because it means that the landowner isn't taking good care of his herd. But again, it is, it does happen in a few instances. And I think it sometimes is, it does occur in some other countries as well.

Monica Morrison [01:16:51] So, we'll see. Where would the funding come for this? I don't know. Is it a potential solution? Would it help mitigate some of the concern about mountain lions? Maybe. Maybe so.

David Todd [01:17:07] Okay. Well, you know, this is a history effort. We're trying to sort of understand these kind of long-term conservation trends. And, and one of the things I think that's interesting about your effort these last several years has been that it's kind of a reprise of an effort back in, I think it was 1991 and 1993 where Sierra Club and others tried to get the state to be more attentive to the needs of mountain lions in Texas. Do you know much about that effort that you might be able to share?

Monica Morrison [01:17:49] Just what I've read about it, and I haven't looked at it extensively. You're right: Sierra Club and some others did want a change for mountain lions back in the early nineties. They introduced two bills to the legislature in 1971. One suggesting classification of the cat as a game species, and the second one as complete protection for the species. Both were defeated.

Monica Morrison [01:18:14] Then in 1973, the Non-Game Species Act passed. The the Act designated mountain lions as a non-game species with essentially no protections, and it has been that way ever since. In 1977, Texans did add, Texas did add regulations to provide protections to some non-game species, but not for mountain lions.

Monica Morrison [01:18:34] So, we have had 50 years or so of this cat having been a non-game species.

David Todd [01:18:45] So, it sounds like there are other non-game species in the state that somehow qualified for extra protections in 1977. And I'm always curious to try to get a better view of how the mountain lion stacks up against other animals that are sort of in its niche, in

its regulatory pigeonhole. How would you compare the lion and those that got a little bit extra protection?

Monica Morrison [01:19:20] Well, to be honest, I'm not really sure which other species did get some form of protection as a non-game species. So I'm really not, not really able to answer your question. But, I guess I would say that, again, it was not afforded any kind of protections because there was a push by certain individuals that did not want to see change.

David Todd [01:19:47] Hmm. Yeah. Change is hard.

Monica Morrison [01:19:51] Yes.

David Todd [01:19:52] So, it's, it's interesting that a lot of the management rules are sort of focused on the animal itself, the wildlife creature. But I guess it's really a two-way street that it's also about managing people, and their expectations, and their needs and desires. And do you have any thoughts about how people might be managed better so that we can maybe co-exist in a better fashion with mountain lions?

Monica Morrison [01:20:29] Well, that's the topic of the day for everything, isn't it, right now? Again, I think we've both said this. This will take time. Attitudes about this topic or any others don't usually change quickly. My belief is that if, in fact, Texas Parks and Wildlife does undertake, at some point, a statewide research study on our cat, that the results will show that our concern for our mountain lion is justified, that mountain lion numbers have declined to the point where those who have opposed this change will realize this cat may become extirpated, at least in South Texas, because of human action.

Monica Morrison [01:21:11] And even those I've read before, people that oppose any kind of change for our cat, often comment that they don't want to see the cat disappear. I think there are some animal husbandry techniques that are used elsewhere that could have an effect on keeping lions away from livestock might help, such as the use of lighting or the use of electric fences. And I don't propose to know a heck of a lot about both of those other than what I've read, and the success that there has been associated with those.

Monica Morrison [01:21:45] You know, I'm reminded of some stories I've read about in India, where, a country which has, of course, a plenitude of wildlife, including leopards and tigers. And, the people in the countryside often build uncovered water wells, and wildlife, including both of these cats sometimes fall into them. And the villagers, often assisted by wildlife rangers or park rangers, will rescue these animals from the wells and set them free. And yet these animals sometimes cause depredation, and they will also, unfortunately, sometimes kill people.

Monica Morrison [01:22:21] But I see those, and, and I'm just marveling that here are these people trying to save this animal, and wondered would that ever happen in Texas? I don't know. Maybe.

Monica Morrison [01:22:33] I think until people who oppose change see the value in these cats, the situation will continue to some extent. But I think a change in regulations will help over time as well. And I think, I think as well, I do believe this, this stakeholder group, once it convenes, will go a long way toward helping to perhaps manage expectations, and see that we're not out to, we're not out to sabotage anybody and their interests.

David Todd [01:23:12] Right. You know something that I think I picked up on there: you were talking about just sort of recognizing and seeing the value in these animals, and how even in a country like India where some of these predators can be just a really big public safety threat, that they nevertheless see value in the, you know, the leopard that might fall into their source of water, or the tiger. I was interested in this kind of question of value because I, I was reading about the restitution prices that are put on different kinds of animals in Texas and that the mountain lion is, is really low. It's down with skunks and raccoons...

Monica Morrison [01:24:08] Mhmmm.

David Todd [01:24:09] Despite its apex position, and, you know, how important it is in the ecosystem. Can you talk a little bit about that, you know, how we value mountain lions at least as a, as a state government?

Monica Morrison [01:24:25] I think, individually, and I think if you talked to agency personnel or Commissioners or maybe even some legislators that they would believe that mountain lions have a role in our ecosystem. I think some of them understand the benefits that these cats provide.

Monica Morrison [01:24:49] But again, I think there is just such, there's always been a vocal group that has opposed change for the mountain lion, and that's why it has remained the way it has been.

Monica Morrison [01:25:06] You know, again, going back to just the reality of the situation, mountain lions live on private property. Well, if Texas Parks and Wildlife wants to conduct any kind of research of any sort, or have dealings with landowners, they have to have permission from these landowners to go on their property, so they have to be cautious of their audience.

Monica Morrison [01:25:32] Then the other thing, you know, some of the funding, although it's, I understand, it's in decline now, in Texas and other states, you know, their revenue coming in from hunters, from hunting license and such, funds a part of the agency's operations. So, you know, they walk kind of a, all of them walk a fine line, quite frankly, in terms of what can be done, what they feel they are capable of doing, and what they feel they might be allowed to do in terms of our cat.

David Todd [01:26:10] Do you think ... I think you've mentioned several times the sort of out-sized role that landowners play. And I think I read once that one or two per cent of the population now is involved in agriculture and sort of rural land ownership. And do you think it's the kind of situation where there's a small minority that feels very deeply, very passionately, and then there's a very large majority that it's just not their priority. It's a, it's a, it's a sort of a wide but very shallow level of concern among the majority of people regarding mountain lions.

Monica Morrison [01:26:55] I do believe [excuse me], I do believe there are those who are just flat out opposed to change. I don't know that that is the majority by any means. And we know, too, that the face of agriculture in this state, and I guess elsewhere in the country, is changing. You know, I've read of a lot of these really large ranches being sold that have been in families for generations, and they get subdivided and split up. And you've got absentee landowners that come in and buy them up. So it's changing.

Monica Morrison [01:27:29] You know, again, I think that will be something that becomes very apparent in terms of just how many people are opposed to change once we have this stakeholder advisory group. And what can be done to dispel some level of that concern remains to be seen.

David Todd [01:27:50] Okay. So one of the things I think that's really interesting is, is to think about where these mountain lions are. I think you've told me today, too, that traditionally they've been, they've had a real stronghold in West Texas, and then, you know, were challenged in South Texas, but I understand that that they're being seen outside of those areas. Can you talk a little bit about these outliers?

Monica Morrison [01:28:27] As much as I know about them. So Texas Parks and Wildlife maintains a list of confirmed mountain lion sightings, and most of those are in West Texas the vast majority. There are some in some parts of south Texas. Outside of those two areas, I counted about 25 of these since the 1980s when this, when this list was first created. And quite frankly, I would imagine a lot of these sightings, throughout the state, are of the same cat, because one of, one of the difficulties in identifying mountain lions, which, by the way, scientific name is *Puma concolor*, which means a cat of all one color, is it's very difficult to distinguish one cat from another. So there may be multiple sightings of the same cat that are confirmed regardless of the location.

Monica Morrison [01:29:18] I would speculate that these cats are, that we see outside of west and south Texas, are dispersing from those areas. But again, David, without, without any further knowledge or research, it's very hard to say where they originated. We do know that throughout the country, mountain lions are migrating eastward toward their historical habitat. I mean, you know, at one point we had mountain lions throughout the entire country, and then European settlers came here, and through the westward expansion of the country, killed off so many of our, of our animals and forced these cats into the west, which is why to this day, they still, their stronghold is in the western part of the country.

David Todd [01:30:09] Well, I think that I'd read one of your really interesting points that you've made about Texas' pretty distinctive location in abutting Mexico, and that we have this maybe unique role in having a source for replenishment of mountain lions from Mexico, in addition to other wildlife. And I was wondering if you could talk about that, that kind of connection of Texas and the lands to the south of our border.

Monica Morrison [01:30:54] I, again, this is, this is what my belief is. And this came about for one of my outreach events. And I thought, you know, people ask me at presentations, okay, or outreach events, "Well, where do these all these cats live?" So I got a map of Texas and I started to plot the areas throughout the state where our cats either do still live or have lived. And what became apparent is that all of them converge in south Texas. So all of our five species of native cats, you know, at one point you could have found in far south Texas, close to the border.

Monica Morrison [01:31:34] For some, like the jaguar and the jaguarundi, Texas was the northern end of their distribution, though these cats are found throughout much of Central and South America. Same is true for ocelots and mountain lions. They exist all the way down into Brazil and farther.

Monica Morrison [01:31:52] The bobcat's the only one whose range extends only about halfway into Mexico and not beyond. And my guess for that, and that's all that really is, is an

educated guess, is that they're just, there's too much competition from other predators there for them to survive.

Monica Morrison [01:32:06] So, that tells me that Mexico, and the countries to the south, are really the stronghold of these felines, and that Texas just happened to border Mexico, and that's why we've had the relative breadth of wild cats that we've had.

David Todd [01:32:24] That's fascinating. I guess Texas is a crossroads in lots of ways.

David Todd [01:32:31] So, I think we're kind of drawing to a close here. And I thought this might be a good chance to talk some not so much about what's happened to-date, but maybe look into the future and hear what you think about what you might foresee for the mountain lion in Texas.

Monica Morrison [01:32:51] Well, I am optimistic about a change for our cat. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. I do think we will see a positive change. I don't know what that's going to look like, or when that's going to happen, but I think it's due to Texans for Mountain Lions and others who support our cat.

Monica Morrison [01:33:09] You know, let's face it, it's going to take time to undo 50 years of no protections for this animal. And I think compromise, again, will be a key among all stakeholders. So follow up with me after we've had our stakeholder group meeting or so, maybe I could, I can give you a better answer than that.

David Todd [01:33:32] Well, and I gather this this future for the mountain lion, despite Lauren's, you know, own concerns, is going to end up being some sort of a politically negotiated settlement. And do you, you mentioned a moment ago that there'll probably be some sort of compromise. Do you see some kind of fruitful areas where compromise might be useful for the mountain lion?

Monica Morrison [01:34:10] Trap check times could potentially be one. We feel that 36 hours is reasonable. Again, it is in keeping with current furbearer regulations in the state.

Monica Morrison [01:34:23] But, is that an area where compromise could be made? Perhaps.

Monica Morrison [01:34:32] Harvest reporting? I think harvest reporting is critical to getting an idea, I mean, that's, that's in large part how many other states have an idea of what their mountain lion population is, because they require hunters to report the animals that they harvest every year. And that way it helps them keep track of how many there are. So harvest reporting, in some fashion, could be an area of compromise, although I'm not exactly sure what that would look like.

Monica Morrison [01:35:06] I guess it really all comes down to what's, what's presented before us, and what do others that don't agree with our viewpoints want to see, and vice versa?

Monica Morrison [01:35:17] What are we able to compromise on?

Monica Morrison [01:35:20] Management by region is one. Most states that have mountain lions manage based on what they typically call, "management units", and it's X number of cats

in a hunting season that can be, can be hunted. Maybe in Texas, it's, it's we look at the South Texas population because we know that one's really in trouble right now.

Monica Morrison [01:35:49] I don't know. It's an interesting question, and one that I think, until the cards are laid out on the table, it's difficult to answer where areas of compromise could occur. But certainly they will. And I think it's compromise hopefully all the way around the table.

David Todd [01:36:06] Well, you know, it sounds like Texas is sort of an outlier in its lax regulation of mountain lions. Do you see any other states as having, you know, similar politics, similar population, where they could be good models for Texas?

Monica Morrison [01:36:31] Well, I will say I think there are some, not surprisingly, similar viewpoints in other states to ours among certain folks. The fact is the cats in the other states back in the early, early seventies, primarily, were all deemed as game species, for the most part, not totally.

Monica Morrison [01:36:55] Are there some that are role models? Perhaps. I think Montana has a good, or a reasonable, mountain lion policy, regulations toward their cat? I don't know.

Monica Morrison [01:37:08] That's probably something that our mountain lion biologists can help direct us on, when it gets to that point of, you know, what, what state would we use as a role model, or do we take several states and try to cull from those the best that we think would be most appropriate for Texans? That's, that's another way to look at it, too.

Monica Morrison [01:37:30] I will say, David, that every other state that has a resident mountain lion population has some form of protection for them. As I said, in most states they're game species, which means there're specific hunting seasons and limits on the number that can be killed. In California, they're protected. In North Dakota, they're furbearers. And of course, the Florida panther is classified as endangered. And I will say no other state allows this mountain lion trapping the way we do, except for Texas.

David Todd [01:38:07] Wow. Well, you have taught us a lot, and covered a lot of ground.

David Todd [01:38:12] Is there anything that you'd like to add? Is there something we might have given short shrift to that, that you might like to mention now, before we wrap up?

Monica Morrison [01:38:21] I guess the only, the only the only closing comment I would have is, I hope that we cannot allow our mountain lion to suffer the same fate as our jaguar and jaguarundi in Texas. Let's not let this cat be extirpated, which is a concern, especially in south Texas. Let's, let's help this animal while we can still do so.

David Todd [01:38:50] And what happened to the jaguar and the jaguarundi?

Monica Morrison [01:38:55] Killed. I mean, just their numbers were, they were wiped out, by human encroachment. Jaguars, especially. I mean, they're, they are the apex predator in the cat species in this hemisphere. And the last one there was killed in the 1940s. The last jaguarundi was killed in South Texas back in about 1984, '85, never to be seen or at least confirmed sighting, let me say it that way.

Monica Morrison [01:39:24] It's interesting. I periodically will get emails from folks telling me that they've seen jaguarundis in highly improbable areas of the state, and I just have to tell them, sorry, there's been no confirmed sightings since the mid-eighties.

Monica Morrison [01:39:40] So, I don't want to see that happen to our cat, to our mountain lion.

David Todd [01:39:45] Well, good. Well, I'm glad that you're making these efforts to intervene and help out, and also glad that you took time to explain some of this to us.

David Todd [01:39:59] Is there anything else that we should touch on?

Monica Morrison [01:40:04] I can't think so, just keep up with Texas Native Cats. We've got a website. We've got a Facebook page. We're on social media. And Texans for Mountain Lions also has a website. It's not too late, if anybody wants to go to Texans for Mountain Lions, and through that site, can submit a letter of concern that goes to Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, a host of other officials, to voice your concern.

David Todd [01:40:38] All right. Speaking out for Lauren.

David Todd [01:40:42] Well, thank you, Monica. It has been really nice to you to do this and it's been pleasant spending some time with you.

Monica Morrison [01:40:52] Thank you, David. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about our cats.

David Todd [01:40:56] All right. Thank you. Hope for our paths cross sometime soon.

Monica Morrison [01:41:00] Thank you. Bye bye.

David Todd [01:41:02] Bye now.