



# Editorial: More than hope

*Published: Wednesday, January 6, 2010 at 6:01 a.m.*

On New Year's Eve, a panther kitten was run over by a car on a road in Naples. That brought the number of panther road kills in 2009 to a record high of 17.

"It's an unfortunate milestone," Gabriella Ferraro, spokesperson for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, told Florida Today this week. "All we can hope for is an improvement in 2010 that motorists will take heed of our warnings while they're driving through panther habitat and to use caution."

Is hope really all that's left for the survival of the Florida panther? Hope that careless motorists will somehow begin to be a little more alert?

Well, not exactly. As another FWC spokesman, Gary Morse, told Florida Today, "Another answer is to increase habitat for these animals. Habitat loss has been a critical factor."

Loss of habitat is exactly why three environmental groups - the Center for Biological Diversity, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), and Council of Civic Associations - recently announced their intention to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for its failure to preserve habitat for an animal that has been on the federal Endangered Species List since 1967.

"The Florida panther, which has been on the endangered species list for 43 years without recovery, represents what is left of an imperiled ecosystem, a symbol of everything else that is going to disappear unless the federal government undertakes protective measures that work," said Ann Hauck of the Council of Civic Associations. "The most critical threat is the continued erosion of habitat essential to its survival and recovery."

There are an estimated 100 wild panthers remaining in Florida. The litigants have identified three critical areas in southwest Florida that must be protected from development to give the panthers a fighting chance at survival. Failing habitat preservation, hope really is all that remains.

## Colliding freedoms

Speaking of careless drivers, this may be the year when distracted driving finally becomes a priority.

This week The New York Times reported that some 200 bills have been proposed around the nation to ban texting while driving or restrict motorists from using handheld cell phones.

Jonathan Adkins, of the Governors Highway Safety Association, told The Times that cell use on the highways is "the hottest safety issue in the states right now by far."

It's about time. Numerous studies have well documented the increase in traffic accidents as a result of careless cell phone use. In the past, legislators, including those in Florida, have been reluctant to restrict the growing use of cell phones by drivers, often citing personal freedom as a reason to refrain from passing new laws.

"They will always believe this an issue of personal freedom," Steve Farley, a legislator in Arizona who has tried to pass a ban on texting since 2007 in his state. "They don't take into account the loss of freedom when a texting driver runs into someone and kills them."

Driving on the public roadways has always been deemed a privilege regulated by licensing, not a right of personal freedom. Let this be the year lawmakers finally get serious about cracking down on distracted driving.

Copyright © 2010 Gainesville.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.