

# High Country News

## New Year brings protections for California bobcats and atonement for a Joshua Tree conservationist

Jeremy Miller | Jan 08, 2014

Wolves in several Western states entered 2014 in the crosshairs of hunters, but California's bobcats got a reprieve – thanks in large part to one Joshua Tree landowner and conservationist.

The Bobcat Protection Act of 2013 (AB 1213), introduced in March by Santa Monica assemblyman Richard Bloom (D), went into effect January 1. It prohibits trapping the wild cats along the boundaries of Joshua Tree National Park and requires the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to establish similar no-trapping areas along the boundaries of California's national parks, monuments, wildlife refuges and other designated areas across the state. The new law also bans bobcat trapping on private land without the written consent of the landowner.

As HCN editor Jodi Peterson reported in June, demand for U.S. fur has skyrocketed, mostly from increasingly affluent Chinese and Russian



Tom O'Key, a former reptile trapper and local activist stands on his property in Southern California.

consumers. In 2012, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1,607 bobcats were killed in California during the winter hunting and trapping season. (Though the trapping season is more than two months shorter than hunting season, trappers accounted for more than three-quarters of that total.)

While bobcats are not a federally-protected species, some conservationists

worry that their populations are poorly understood and that continued trapping, along with destruction and fragmentation of prime habitat, poses serious threats to the long-term viability of the species.

If the new law protecting them can be said to have a birthplace, it is on a boulder-strewn hillside on the outskirts of Joshua Tree National Park belonging to local conservationist



Tom O' Key points to the place on his property where he found a cage trap last year.

Tom O'Key. An amateur astronomer and co-founder of the Southern California Desert Video Astronomers, O'Key has been active in a host of local issues, including fighting light pollution and solar farm proposals in the Morongo Basin.

O'Key has also buying up parcels on the boundary of Joshua Tree National Park with the specific purpose of not developing them. "I buy boulders," he says, making a space between his palms of no more than a few inches. "A crack that big is enough space for a Chuckwalla."

His land-buying binge was spurred by a sense of guilt derived from his early days as

a reptile trapper. He scoured these very boulder piles for rare snakes and lizards, which he sold to pet shops, museums and collectors in metro Los Angeles and farther afield. "I have no idea how many critters I killed," says O'Key, who later went on to work for a prominent law firm in Los Angeles. "But I know it was a lot."

We drive a rough road in his full-size Toyota pickup and O'Key stops, gesturing to a large outcrop of the region's hallmark pale monzonite boulders heaped up like a massive cluster of grapes. We exit the truck and walk to the spot where last January he found a cage trap on his property. O'Key points out

several piles of scat in the small hollow, explaining that the trapper had used a pheromone attractant to lure bobcats. "It's powerful stuff," he said. "He sprayed almost a year ago and it's still pulling the cats in."

Other local residents had noticed the disappearance of cats previously seen wandering the area. "Emails were flying around," says Brendan Cummings, a Joshua Tree-based attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "When Tom found the trap on his land, we knew we had a culprit."

Certain that the trap tucked into the boulders was the handiwork of a scofflaw, O'Key decided to call the local police to report what he'd found. He was surprised to learn that the trap was perfectly legal.

He was even more alarmed when the officer who arrived on the scene advised him to return the trap to its owner. Instead of returning the cage directly to the trapper, however, O'Key set something of a trap of his own. He gave it to a reporter at the local newspaper, the Hi-Desert Star. "I thought the paper might be interested in hearing his side of the story," says O'Key.



California Bobcat near the mouth of the Big Sur River, Central California Coast in late spring. Photograph by Flickr user Blake Matheson.

The Hi-Desert Star reached out and the trapper responded, speaking on condition of anonymity. He told reporter Courtney Vaughn that his pelts could fetch between \$80 and \$1700 on the international market. “He was sticking up for the idea that he had every right to exploit these animals,” says O’Key. “Of course that goes against the grain of everything I’m trying to do here.”

The article generated interest far outside the Morongo Basin, and Cummings and O’Key became key players in the push for legislation. “We approached Assemblyman

Richard Bloom (about a statewide trapping ban) not only because he has been a great defender of wildlife in the state, but because some of the most thorough research on bobcats statewide has been conducted in the Santa Monica Mountains, in his district,” says Cummings. O’Key testified for the bill this spring before the state assembly and senate. “We barely made it through the committees,” said O’Key pointing out that all the state Republicans either voted against the bill or abstained.

Though bobcats are one of very few terrestrial predators thought to remain in significant

numbers throughout California, no one is sure how many there are. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife says the state has 72,000 bobcats, but Cummings says that number is outdated, derived from a density study, conducted not in California but Idaho in the 1970s. In signing the bill, Gov. Jerry Brown instructed the legislature to work with the governor’s office to secure funding for a new bobcat population survey.

In spite of the concessions and unknowns, O’Key sees the law as a decisive step forward in protecting one of the West’s most versatile predators. It’s also clear he sees it as a form of ecological atonement. “You can’t buy back your past,” says O’Key. “The best you can do is try to fix what comes next.”