

Tampa Bay Times

Column: Quarries threaten Florida wildlife

By Jaclyn Lopez,
special to the Times

Monday, January 27, 2014

If you dig a quarry in Southwest Florida, the housing developers will come challenge: Lure visitors, protect locals

With our coasts choked by decades of overbuilding, shrewd developers are always looking for clever ways to shoehorn new subdivisions into the fragile inland wetland areas that help clean our water and provide habitat for our most imperiled plants and animals.

Against that backdrop, the trend of quarries morphing into residential developments prompts questions about how well regulators are balancing development with Florida's wildlife and ecosystems.

Permits granted without adequate consideration that these sites may eventually be transformed into sprawling lakefront residential developments fail to consider a



Evidence suggests that by approving a sand and limerock quarry in Collier County, the Army Corps of Engineers failed to fully consider impacts on vulnerable species and their habitats, including endangered Florida panthers.

broad set of long-term impacts on aquifers, drinking water supplies and wildlife.

Take, for instance, the Army Corps of Engineers' approval of a 967-acre sand and limerock quarry in Collier County wetlands — which also happen to be prime Florida panther habitat. There's an abundance of evidence to suggest that by approving the Hogan Island Quarry, the Corps neglected its duty to fully consider impacts on vulnerable species and their habitats, including endangered panthers.

Once common across the Southeastern United States, Florida panthers are now fighting for their lives in the few remaining stretches of habitat remaining to them, including in Collier County. With unchecked suburban development pressures squeezing from all sides, every inch of habitat newly lost com-

mits these panthers to a future dependent on federal and state management and intervention. Every panther lost is critical, including the dozens that have been killed by vehicles in recent years on roads that now crisscross their habitat.

For panthers, the quarry approval was a double-edged sword: Not only will they be further endangered by the loss and degradation of habitat, heavy equipment operation and the more than 1,000 additional daily vehicle trips on local roads, once the mining operation is closed down, the quarry pits may be transformed into virtually lifeless, oxygen-deprived lakes rimmed by residential development.

The Corps has failed not only to adequately weigh the project's long-term impacts on species like panthers, wood storks, crested caracaras and eastern indigo snakes, but also to investigate impacts on nearby wetland preserves. It failed to consider the cumulative effects of other projects in panther habitat on the panther, other wildlife and the water resources we all depend on.

The mine is but one of several mine and residential developments in Southwest Florida, including several in the same watersheds, within a 10-mile radius of the Hogan Island Quarry site. In all, more than 13,000 acres of proposed mining projects in proximity to the Hogan Island Quarry have received authorization from the state and/or the local county municipality, or are currently being pursued.

Among the raft of plans for intensive land uses left unacknowledged in the agency's review are proposals for 45,000 acres of residential and commercial development, as well as transportation infrastructure and other impacts in Florida panther habitat.

That's why several conservation groups, including the one I work for, filed a lawsuit seeking a more thorough review of the project. It has become increasingly clear that questions about the future environmental impacts of these developments far outnumber the answers.

And in a state where the battered Everglades serve as a constant reminder of the cost of failing to adequately balance short-term economic benefits with our best long-term economic and environmental interests, we must take whatever steps are necessary to ensure we make the best decisions for Florida's natural heritage.

Otherwise we can be sure there will be no balance at all.

Jaclyn Lopez, a Florida native who lives in St. Petersburg, is staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. She wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.