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We mustn't give up on protecting the Florida panther

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In the days since the news broke that a record 30 Florida panthers were killed in 2014, much of the response has centered around the idea that in a state now home to nearly 20 million humans, maintaining a panther population of only 100 to 180 might be the best we can do.

ENDANGERED: A male Florida panther in the wild. HANDOUT FWC PHOTO

And that's simply not true.

It's true more people are moving to Florida — about 800 every day, by latest census estimates — giving us the dubious distinction of displacing New York as the nation's third most-populated state.

And it's true unchecked sprawl has already destroyed 95 percent of the Florida panther's original habitat — that's critical to preserving our diverse collection of wildlife.

But even amid those challenges, leading panther experts have long known what needs to be done to save Florida panthers and the habitats we share with them. And in 2014 important steps were initiated toward achieving those goals, which include protecting remaining habitat, creating new panther populations and building corridors to allow freer panther movement and genetic exchange.

First, in 2014 many Floridians worked aggressively for smarter growth and better management of our remaining wild preserves.

For example, last September conservation groups representing thousands of Floridians reached a settlement with the National Park Service to significantly reduce the mushrooming use of off-road vehicles in Florida's Big Cypress National Preserve, home to endangered panthers and many other rare plants and animals.

Similarly, after the Army Corps of Engineers erroneously approved development of a 967-acre quarry in Collier County known to be prime Florida panther habitat, several conservation groups with broad support in the state filed a lawsuit pointing out that the Corps and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service not only failed to adequately weigh the project's long-term impacts on species like panthers, but failed to fully investigate its cumulative effect on panthers and other wildlife.

That lawsuit is now in litigation, with the goal of ensuring the Corps and Wildlife Service conduct much more thorough environmental reviews, both on this project and others moving forward.

Second, suitable areas north of the Caloosahatchee River are being identified to introduce the additional panther populations necessary to sustain a healthy gene pool.

That's what motivated the unprecedented gathering of experts last year in Gainesville to explore reintroducing the panther to places like the Osceola National Forest, Pinhook Swamp and the 700-square-mile Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, a moss-draped preserve once patrolled by Florida panthers.

The panther's 2008 recovery plan (which wasn't finalized until 41 years after the panther gained federal protection in 1967) identified reintroduction to the Okefenokee as critical to recovery.

The experts who make up a group called the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team are now working to develop detailed plans to push forward on those recovery goals.

Florida wildlife managers are also reviewing ways to work with private landowners interested it managing their land as corridors for panther movement.

And finally, in effort to slow the number of fatal traffic collisions that killed 20 panthers last year, the state is looking at ways to upgrade to panther highway crossings with tunnels and fences.

These efforts provide a roadmap for moving forward and remind us that with smart planning we can make sure these beautiful animals are part of the Florida landscape for generations to come.

But it all starts with simply refusing to give up on the big cat that 30 years ago was designated as the state animal, and acknowledging that it, too, has a right to be here.