

Money and Politics Could Doom the Florida Panther — and the Endangered Species Act

FLORIDA'S COLLIER COUNTY is a place of conflict and contradiction. Its southeastern flank features sprawling public landscapes like Big Cypress National Preserve, that wild redoubt of rare orchids and alligator wallows. Its western edge is home to some of the state's most valuable real estate, including Naples, a city of wealthy snowbirds who descend in droves down Interstate Highway 75 each winter. Elsewhere in the county, a booming population and frenzied development clash constantly with beleaguered remnants of the region's flora and fauna — and especially with the endangered Florida panther, an iconic predator beset by existential threats. Collier County is the panther's last best refuge. But it's a panther killing ground, too, and it's getting more deadly by the day.

Florida's state animal has been listed under the Endangered Species Act since the law's inception in 1973. The panther was once so scarce that some thought it gone altogether. When scientists discovered survivors in the 1970s and 80s, the cats were withered and gaunt. They were so inbred that they had crooked tails and faulty hearts. Some adult males even had undescended testicles. Their population had dwindled to a couple dozen hidden away in hot Florida forests.

At the time, the Florida panther was “just hanging on by a thread,” said Deborah Jansen, a National Park Service wildlife biologist who has spent decades wandering the backwoods of Big Cypress.

Jansen, who has blue eyes and a bright, tanned face, played a storied role in bringing the panther back from extinction's edge — she tracked them, studied them, and helped save them. She even once gave CPR to a dying panther. Last winter, Jansen and I met up at Big Cypress headquarters, hopped in her truck, and headed north toward a trail that would take us into the heart of the national preserve. During the drive, Jansen reflected on the panther's recent history:

Roughly 40 years ago, scientists began studying the panthers in earnest to determine the cause of their decline. In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the country's famed conservation agency, introduced eight pumas from Texas into the Florida panther population to fortify its failing genes. In the 2000s, the panthers' numbers climbed and stabilized. Jansen was there through it all.

All that effort, however, has failed to fully safeguard the panther's future. Now incessant development is devouring the big cats' habitat. And bustling Florida traffic often leaves them dead and bleeding by the side of the road. "It is horrendous," Jansen said. "In fact," she added, remarking on the roadkill, "it just came up today that they picked up two more dead panthers."

JANSEN IS NOW watching with alarm as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or FWS, appears ready to permit a plan that would allow some of Collier County's largest private landowners to pursue a string of new developments in panther habitat. Among the developers is the county's namesake, the Collier family, members of which gave millions of dollars to President Donald Trump's reelection bid, the Republican Party, and associated PACs.

For many years now, the Collier family companies and other local landowners have sought to bring new residential communities, roads, commercial real estate, and more to northeastern Collier County, just north of Big Cypress. Jansen and other conservationists fear such development could seriously damage panther habitat, close off suitable range in the north, and bring a flood of new cars to the area. Some even say it could shove the animal toward extinction. But FWS, which is responsible for enforcing the Endangered Species Act and protecting the panther, doesn't appear poised to stop the projects.

A yearlong investigation by The Intercept and Type Investigations examined the forces at play in the development and FWS's role in reviewing and permitting them. Hundreds of public records and dozens of interviews show that as they work to get federal approval for a plan that would pave the way for their developments, the Collier County landowners have hired a phalanx of Washington lawyers and

enjoyed access to top appointees at FWS as well as its parent agency, the U.S. Department of the Interior. The records and interviews paint a picture of a politicized FWS that is struggling to uphold the Endangered Species Act amid a growing global extinction crisis.

For years now, FWS has declined to fully employ the law's most powerful provisions. In the case of the Collier County developers, FWS even accepted money for staffing costs from a private entity — one called Eastern Collier Property Owners, or ECPO, and comprised of companies owned by the Collier family and other local landowners — whose permit application the agency is currently evaluating. This type of financial arrangement is troubling and could potentially create the appearance of conflicts of interest, according to government watchdog groups and Endangered Species Act experts. It is also a symptom of long-term deterioration within FWS, which has been beaten down by years of political attacks and starved budgets. All the while, animals like the panther remain in peril.

FWS released its most recent recovery plan for the Florida panther in 2008, which was intended to guide agency management of the endangered species. The plan stated that in order for the panther to be removed from the endangered species list, three separate populations of 240 individuals each must be established. Yet the panther population hasn't come close to those numbers. There is currently only one population, and Jansen estimates that there are just 150 individuals in it. Despite the recovery plan's unmet objectives, FWS continues to sanction development in panther habitat.

"I don't think there is any way we are going to stop the development," Jansen said, lamenting the threat to the panther.

Last winter, Jansen and I went to the woods together to try to see the big cats. With a sizzling sky overhead, we arrived at the edge of the Big Cypress backcountry, where she unloaded her swamp buggy, a hulking green contraption with huge black tires hitched to a trailer behind her truck. She clambered aboard the machine and invited me on. Together we bounced into the forest to find a Florida panther.

HEAD EAST OUT of Naples, past subdivisions and strip malls, and you'll eventually edge into farm country, where workers from nearby Immokalee pick tomatoes in hot humid fields. Many of the fields belong to rich and powerful landowners, among them Collier Enterprises and Barron Collier Companies, both affiliated with the Collier family. The family's forebear, Barron Collier, bought up more than a million acres in southwest Florida in the early 20th century after amassing a fortune in streetcar advertising.

This region has a violent history, according to Michael Grunwald's book "The Swamp." The U.S. Army waged war on Indigenous populations in the area, a Seminole stronghold, for decades. It was also a scene of shocking corruption when the state government engineered a massive bribe-fueled "[land-grabbing frenzy](#)," as Grunwald calls it, after the Civil War, handing out swamp and forest to speculators and land companies.

The county's northeastern lands, much of which is important Florida panther habitat, are where ECPO hopes to get federal approval for a plan that would allow them to turn [as many as](#) 45,000 acres of farm and forest into residential communities, new roads, and some mining sites.

In pursuit of that goal, the Collier County property owners submitted to FWS a so-called habitat conservation plan, also known as an HCP — part of an application that, if approved, would permit them to develop in panther habitat under the Endangered Species Act so long as they also implement conservation measures on their land. In general, such habitat conservation plans are meant to allow for development while encouraging large-scale land planning and limiting damage to imperiled wildlife. If a private entity's application meets federal standards, it can receive a government permit that grants it limited immunity under the Endangered Species Act should it unintentionally harm or kill endangered species in the course of its commercial activities.

The plan ECPO developed, though controversial, also has potential environmental benefits. In addition to designating large tracts for intensive development, the property owners' plan would put up to 107,000 acres of ranch, farm, and forest into conservation easements and protect them in perpetuity. The plan also promises to fund ecological restoration and species protection programs, including the creation of road crossings for panthers and other wildlife.

Christian Spilker, vice president of Collier Enterprises, one of the leading companies involved in ECPO, said the landowners' plan is a good deal given local development pressures. "We think this is an awfully big public benefit to set aside 107,000 acres of private land for all those benefits, offset by 45,000 acres of development," he said.

The day after I met Jansen, Spilker took me on a tour of lands that fall within the habitat conservation plan and showed me a farm field that he said would be the site of one of Collier Enterprises's proposed residential villages. By and large, he said, "this is not preferred habitat" for panthers. While Spilker is technically correct that the field itself does not constitute a panther breeding habitat, said Bob Frakes, a former FWS ecologist, panthers "still use it. They will cross through it." Frakes added, "Their home ranges are many square miles."

The ECPO proposal is actually good for the panther, Spilker asserted, because development in the area is inevitable, and at least the landowners' plan will provide "real time preservation and advanced protections that would not occur otherwise."

"We are the path for those protections," he said. "There is no other viable path."

Conservation groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida ardently dispute Spilker's claim that the Collier plan would be good for panthers, arguing that science shows it would actually put the animal in serious peril.

Two peer-reviewed studies, one from 2006 and another from 2015, found that maintaining existing core habitat in South Florida is

critical to sustain a viable panther population. Nevertheless, FWS has let developers wipe out tens of thousands of acres of panther habitat in recent decades, as the journalist Craig Pittman details in his book “Cat Tale.” And now, according to the 2015 paper, published by Frakes and his colleagues, the Florida panther is restricted to 5 percent of its historic range with just one breeding population. The paper also found that in order for the panther to survive, “all remaining breeding habitat in south Florida should be maintained.”

A recent analysis found that the plan, if it comes to full fruition, would cause the direct loss of at least 16,880 acres of adult panther breeding habitat.

But the proposed ECPO development footprint overlaps with as many as 45,000 acres of [primary and secondary panther habitat](#), according to maps included in the habitat conservation plan. And a recent analysis conducted by Frakes on behalf of Florida conservationists found that the plan, if it comes to full fruition, would cause the direct loss of at least 16,880 acres of adult panther breeding habitat, nearly equivalent to the land area of Manhattan. Opponents of the ECPO plan say that the loss of this large quantity of breeding habitat could fatally undermine the subspecies’ chances for survival and recovery.

The ECPO plan poses other potential threats to the cats as well, including an influx of new residents and their automobiles. According to the plan’s conservationist opponents, the amount of development allowed under the plan could see nearly 300,000 new residents move into the area as well as 225,000 new vehicles. They contend that ensuing roadkill mortality could claim as many as 1,276 panthers over a 50-year period. These numbers were drawn in part from an analysis conducted for conservationists by Reed Noss, the former editor of the journal *Conservation Biology* and an expert on habitat conservation plans. Noss wrote that the ECPO plan suffers from

“dangerous inadequacies,” including the absence of a scientifically valid analysis of the project’s roadkill impact. Already, roadway mortality is a leading cause of death for panthers — at least [17 died](#) in roadside collisions in 2020.

ECPO, for its part, disputed the conservation groups’ traffic and roadkill analysis. The company claimed, in response to emailed questions, that “potential impacts to panthers and their prey base due to habitat fragmentation are largely avoided by the configuration of the HCP.”

The ECPO plan, it’s worth noting, does not stand alone. It comes alongside other development in the area, including a proposed state toll road that panther advocates oppose. Indeed, Collier County is a development hotspot and has been for some time. Barron Collier Companies has already built a small town called Ave Maria in the area.

All this has put endangered species and their conservationist defenders in a tight bind. Making matters worse is FWS’s weak enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.

THE WORLD IS facing a biodiversity crisis that threatens to drain the planet’s gene pool. As many as [1 million species](#) face extinction, some within coming decades, and hundreds of species domestic to the United States are at risk. But the U.S. benefits from one of the world’s strongest conservation laws: the Endangered Species Act, a powerful statute that has rarely been allowed to fulfill its true potential.

Though ECPO’s plan for Collier County applies to private property, it falls under the purview of the Endangered Species Act because of its likely impact on endangered species. Ultimately, the plan requires approval from FWS, and that approval hinges on a key provision of the act called Section 7.

Among other things, Section 7 enables FWS to block any federal action — including permitting decisions, infrastructure projects, and more — that is likely to jeopardize the survival and recovery of

endangered species. In theory, it is a potent provision that allows FWS to stop a wide range of public and private development that harms wildlife. When the agency reviews a project and makes a “jeopardy determination,” in agency parlance, that project is supposed to stop in its tracks until it seriously reduces its impact on imperiled species.

The provision serves an important function amid the Earth’s current mass extinction event.

According to Dan Rohlf, an Endangered Species Act expert at Lewis & Clark Law School, “the prohibitions in Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act ... are really the heart of the statute’s protections for threatened and endangered species.” Yet they are increasingly a dead letter.

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Despite ample authority, FWS almost never calls jeopardy on anything, according to a 2015 analysis published in the scientific journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The analysis looked at more than 6,800 formal Section 7 reviews conducted by FWS between 2008 and mid-2015 and found that the agency only called jeopardy twice in that time. And even when it did, the study found that “no project was stopped or extensively altered as a result of FWS finding jeopardy.” That trend continued in the Trump years.

According to several experts on the Endangered Species Act and former Interior Department officials, FWS’s infrequent use of the jeopardy mechanism is in part a culmination of Reagan-era efforts to weaken the mechanism as well as inadequate political support for the federal agency among elected officials.

“FWS believes calling jeopardy is a failure and should be avoided at all costs,” said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation group that regularly sues FWS for failing to uphold the Endangered Species Act. “By never calling jeopardy,” he added, “the service undermines its own negotiating power and therefore undermines the conservation of the very species of wildlife and plants it is mandated to protect.” (In response to emailed questions, FWS wrote, “The Service works diligently with federal agencies and applicants to help ensure their proposed actions are not likely to jeopardize listed species or destroy or adversely modify critical habitat.”)

Now FWS is conducting a Section 7 review to determine whether the ECPO plan — with its proposed large-scale development, conservation measures, and associated federal permits — will jeopardize the survival of the Florida panther, among other endangered animals. A decision from the agency has been expected for months and could come at any time.

AS FWS REVIEWS the landowners’ plan, ECPO has made its presence felt in Washington, D.C., where decisions from local and regional field offices are often sent for final approval.

In February 2020, according to Interior Department emails obtained through open records requests, lawyers for the Collier companies and other ECPO landowners approached top Interior appointees, including then-FWS Director Aurelia Skipwith. The business representatives asked for a meeting to discuss a key obstacle facing their habitat conservation plan: the surge of new automobile traffic that will likely accompany new development within the plan area, which could devastate panthers. According to the email exchanges, ECPO and their lawyers encouraged FWS to take a very specific approach to its analysis of the conservation plan’s impact on panther roadkill.

“The issue concerns whether future, offsite collisions between Florida panthers and vehicles operated by third parties on state, county and local roadways should be attributed to” the approval of the habitat

conservation plan and associated permits, wrote an attorney with the lobbying firm Hunton Andrews Kurth, which represents the landowners, in an email to Skipwith and other appointees. “The answer, in our view, is no.” The next morning, the lawyer received a reply from Skipwith, who offered to “look into the matter.” Skipwith also put the lawyer in touch with her aide William Dove. “He will reach out so that we can reach a resolution,” Skipwith wrote the Hunton attorney. (A Collier Enterprises spokesperson said that ECPO representatives did not end up meeting with officials at the Department of the Interior headquarters, but that they did discuss the issue with the FWS regional office instead.)

A few months later, in July, the Interior Department chose to include the Collier habitat conservation plan in a list of projects that were to be fast-tracked with “expedited” environmental review in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as part of a federal effort to spur economic development.

According to campaign finance records, the Collier family itself has engaged in major political giving in recent years. In February 2020 alone, two members of the family, whose donation records identify them as owners of Collier Enterprises, gave more than \$1.4 million combined to the Republican National Committee, Trump’s campaign coffers, and a Trump-aligned PAC. (In response to emailed questions, an ECPO spokesperson wrote that “there is no connection whatsoever between personal contributions made by members of the Collier Family during an election year and events associated with ECPO’s decade-long pursuit of the HCP permits.”)

Winter 2020 was not the first time ECPO representatives had the ear of top federal officials, according to records obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests. Earlier in the Trump administration, ECPO’s lawyers circulated a legal memo to key FWS officials, arguing that the agency, in conducting its Section 7 review, should not treat “vehicle strikes of panthers” as “‘direct’ or ‘indirect’ effects” of its decision to permit their plan. There is “general sentiment that the decision how to address vehicle strikes could have national

implications,” wrote a Hunton attorney in an April 2017 email to FWS’s Assistant Director for Endangered Species Gary Frazer.

The roadkill issue is key because, in the past, FWS officials in Florida have considered roadway collisions with panthers an indirect effect of development, as they did in 2018 when they published a Section 7 review of a proposed 625-unit residential development in Lee County. Should FWS find that the ECPO plan and the development it enables are associated with too much panther roadkill, it could trigger a jeopardy determination. ECPO lawyers appear to want the agency to abandon the view that roadkill impacts will be a direct or even an indirect effect of their plan in the hopes that such a change will make approval more likely.

In January 2018, meanwhile, Spilker, two Hunton lawyers, and a Barron Collier Companies executive met with then-Interior Department Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt and top aides, according to agency records. (An ECPO spokesperson said that the meeting “was not related to the HCP nor was the HCP discussed.”)

ECPO’s contacts with FWS have not been limited to Washington. For years, their representatives have had regular meetings and calls with officials in FWS’s South Florida field office as well as its regional office in Atlanta. Hundreds of pages of emails, memos, and meeting agendas indicate a close relationship between the parties. For example, in a draft memo to FWS headquarters dated June 2020, Leo Miranda, the director of the agency’s southeastern region, described the close working relationship with ECPO, writing that since April 2018, FWS officials have “met continuously with ECPO every other week to review progress, settle issues, and exchange information to advance our review.”

In a 2019 memo, meanwhile, FWS officials in Atlanta hinted at forthcoming approval of the habitat conservation plan. “We anticipate litigation to follow the final decision,” the officials wrote. “We need to make sure all documents and the administrative record are as defensible as possible to minimize risk to the applicant (most importantly) and the Service.” While contact between an applicant

and FWS during the development of a habitat conservation plan is not necessarily unusual, these and other communications from public records requests show, at times, notable deference on the part of the agency.

In response to emailed questions about these communications, FWS said that during the conservation plan application process, “we work with the applicant one on one. This is true for all applicants whether they be individuals, corporations or private landowners.”

ECPO’S INTERACTIONS WITH the FWS have also included large direct payments. The arrangement amounts to a situation where the landowners paid for staff positions at the agency that will decide the fate of their plan for eastern Collier County — an arrangement that reflects, among other things, FWS’s perennial lack of funding, according to experts.

A memorandum of agreement signed by the agency and ECPO in June 2016 stipulates that the landowners would pay FWS more than \$200,000 to fund the agency’s normal operations while it dedicated “staff away from those duties to facilitate the development and review” of the conservation plan and associated permits. FWS ultimately invoiced Collier Enterprises for at least \$292,000 for that purpose, according to documents obtained through FOIA requests. Two FWS staff members assigned to work with ECPO to craft their habitat conservation plan would later go on to help lead the Section 7 evaluation of the plan’s impact on panthers.

In late September 2018, FWS sent Spilker two invoices for staffing that totaled more than \$115,000, according to billing records. A month later, an FWS official wrote an email to Spilker and a Barron Collier Companies executive with the subject line “Got \$,” according to the public records. The official wrote: “Gents, THANKS for your help getting the checks to the RO” — the regional office. In response, the Barron Collier Companies executive wrote back, “Keep Chuck going...” — an apparent reference to one of the FWS staffers who was assigned to help the companies with their conservation plan and later ended up working on the Section 7 evaluation. (In the public records obtained by Type Investigations and The Intercept, the 2018 invoices

and email were the latest documents referencing the financial relationship between the developers and FWS.)

FWS declined to comment on the arrangement. An ECPO spokesperson wrote that its “financial assistance ... is helping to offset the government’s staffing costs for the required processes, reviews, and reports — period. Any intimation to the contrary is baseless and explicitly incorrect.”

Kevin Bell, staff counsel at Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, called the arrangement “corrosive” to public service. “It is pretty rare to see a property developer cheer on regulatory staff by name, but then it’s also pretty rare that the federal government puts employees performing environmental reviews up for auction,” Bell said. “It isn’t hard to guess how that review will come out when the McMansion lobby is literally paying their salary.”

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“It stinks,” said Pat Parenteau, an environmental law professor at Vermont Law School. “The last thing in the world the agency should be doing is giving the public the perception that it has been bought.” He said the Interior Department’s Office of the Inspector General should investigate the matter.

Spilker readily admits that the landowner coalition has advocated for itself in Washington. “It is part of the process,” he said. For all of ECPO’s de facto lobbying, however, he believes the landowners’ conservation and development plan deserves approval on its merits alone.

“If you think that things aren’t going to move in the direction of development in Florida, you are fooling yourself,” he told me as he

drove past sprawling Collier County ranchlands. “And if you can help guide and direct the development into appropriate locations and have big public benefits as offsets, that is a much better way to do it than the piecemeal approach.” Spilker hopes FWS takes this approach in its evaluation, he said after taking me past a hidden panther den. “We will see what they decide.”

PAULA HALUPA, WHO worked as a biologist at the South Florida FWS office for nearly 20 years until her recent retirement, believes the agency should call jeopardy.

It is not a habitat conservation plan, she said in an interview. It is “a habitat loss plan.”

Her husband, Bob Frakes, the former FWS scientist who conducted key research on the panther in 2015, is also against the habitat conservation plan. They say they both oppose the ECPO plan because they believe the best available science — that panthers can’t afford any more core habitat loss. They are also worried about all those new automobiles on South Florida roads.

“It is like the worst possible place you could put a project like that,” Halupa said. “It is in the primary zone of the panther, and it is all these people, all these cars, everything.”

Some conservationists have different views of the habitat conservation plan, among them Defenders of Wildlife, which supports the process. According to Elizabeth Fleming, the group’s Florida representative, “There are parts of the HCP that we would like to see improved, but there is a lot of good to it also.” She cited especially the 107,000 acres that would be preserved. Two local Audubon Society chapters, which cumulatively received \$45,000 from a Collier family foundation in 2017 and 2018, also support the plan. (Audubon Florida Executive Director Julie Wraithmell said that the Collier foundation is one of the group’s many donors and its donations did not affect Audubon’s decision to back the ECPO project.)

Other conservation organizations, meanwhile, are desperate to stop the ECPO habitat conservation plan, chief among them the

Conservancy of Southwest Florida, based in Naples. It has campaigned to block the plan, pressing FWS to call jeopardy. The Conservancy hired scientists, including Frakes and Noss, the editor and expert on habitat conservation plans, to put together reports analyzing what they say are flaws in the landowners' plan. The group is concerned that the 107,000 acres the plan sets aside for preservation will actually be left open to oil and gas drilling, as well as other commercial activities, which the conservation plan indicates is a possibility.

There is also some tribal opposition to the plan: Public records obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests show that the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida submitted a letter to FWS in 2019 urging the agency to deny ECPO's plan. According to the agency's summary of the letter, the Miccosukee said that the plan, among other concerns, "violates tribal rights under federal law" and "the panther and other wildlife would lose habitat, connections to other wildlife populations, and become subject to greater human conflict."

FEW OBSERVERS THINK the agency will ultimately call jeopardy. "They could announce that they are going to build a nuclear weapons test site in the middle of panther habitat, and the Fish and Wildlife Service would find some way to approve it," said Frakes. Numerous FWS retirees and outside observers interviewed for this story believe political interests influence the agency's scientific decisions. And FWS has been underfunded for decades, according to experts.

"It is a very demoralized agency," said U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, a Democrat from Michigan, whose late husband John was an author of the Endangered Species Act. "Professionals [work for FWS] because they love the outdoors, and they want to protect our natural resources," she observed. "Not only are they not appreciated, their budgets are being cut, they are being undermined when they make recommendations based on science."

The last four years were particularly hard on the agency. The Trump administration weakened the Endangered Species Act with regulatory

rollbacks. It removed protections from imperiled wildlife. As for Section 7, the administration sought to stymie proposed jeopardy decisions that stand in the way of big commercial interests, as [it did](#) in California in 2019.

The enforcement “teeth” of the Endangered Species Act have been ground down to “just a bunch of nubs.”

All this adds up to a sorry situation, according to Don Barry, a former Interior Department official who helped shape its endangered species program while serving in four different administrations in the late 20th century. The enforcement “teeth” of the Endangered Species Act, he said, have been ground down to “just a bunch of nubs.” (FWS did not respond to requests for comment on critics’ claims that the agency has weakened its overall enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.)

The Florida panther is a lens on these trends. Flattened by motorists, beset by genetic problems, threatened by a disturbing new neurological affliction, and hemmed in by development, the panthers need a strong FWS and a strong Endangered Species Act. But that’s not the reality right now.

Halupa, the former FWS official in Florida, gets emotional recounting the many times she saw front-line FWS biologists try to call jeopardy on harmful projects in panther habitat, only to be overruled by supervisors. She described an agency culture that puts political considerations over conservation imperatives — and [silences dissenters](#).

“The ESA is such a powerful act,” she said, between tears. “But the Fish and Wildlife Service makes it weak, purposefully makes it weak.”

JANSEN AND I drove for hours around the Big Cypress backcountry, our eyes peeled for predators. We passed through a landscape of slash pine and cypress; we saw palmetto, dark marshes and dry uplands, wading ibis and lounging alligators, but no luck. The Florida panther is endangered, after all — a vanishing subspecies. We did discover plenty of panther tracks, however, and Jansen decided to make me a memento. She pulled a bag of plaster and a jug of water out of the swamp buggy, mixed the ingredients in a bowl, and poured its contents into a depression in the dirt. She wanted to send me home with a plaster cast of a panther print.

Jansen's favorite memories from her lifetime among panthers, she said, involve watching newborn kittens grown into mature adults, then die natural deaths — all without ever leaving Big Cypress.

“I am glad I've lived when I've lived,” she told me, “because I think we are in for some rough times.”

Between habitat loss, traffic mortality, declining deer herds, and other maladies, Jansen says she is “extremely concerned that we are going to have a really hard time keeping [the panther] as part of the ecosystem in Florida.”

The plaster dried quickly. Jansen pulled it from the ground and handed it over — a white slab etched with a panther print and dirt stuck between the toes. Someday down the road, that plaster print could be the sad relic of another wild animal future generations won't get to see.