

Tribute

A biologist's biologist: Remembering Eric York 1970–2007



Erik York

NPS/EMILY GARDING

Editor's Note: This memorial was contributed by many of Eric York's colleagues and friends throughout the National Park Service.

WITH THE PASSING OF ERIC YORK ON 2 November 2007, Grand Canyon National Park and the National Park Service lost an extremely talented and dedicated wildlife biologist. More importantly, the mountain lions, carnivores, and other wildlife he studied lost one of their most knowledgeable and devoted human allies and advocates. Eric's work, in fact his life, centered on his passion for wildlife, the outdoors, and grand landscapes of our national parks and other wildlands.

Eric worked at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona as a wildlife biologist studying carnivore movement patterns from July 2006 until his death, and previously as a contract biologist starting in 2003. He also worked for Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in California and Lake Clark National Park and Preserve in Alaska, in addition

to his work for the Biological Resources Discipline of the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of California–Davis Wildlife Health Center on mountain lions and other large carnivores, specializing in live-capture techniques.

Grand Canyon lion study

Beginning in 2003, the National Park Service participated in a radiotelemetry study of mountain lions within the Grand Canyon ecosystem to complement existing studies using remote cameras, track surveys, and scat and hair collection. Eric's skill in trapping techniques and his compassion in handling captured cats were key to the successful implementation of the telemetry program that allowed collection of specific information about lion predation habits, reproductive activity, and other behaviors.

Objectives of the study include determining behavior patterns of lions that use human-populated areas; determining

the impact of park infrastructure, such as roads, on lion behavior; and analyzing the effects of management of adjacent public lands on lion populations in order to develop management and conservation strategies. Research to date showed that although collared cats use sites surrounding Grand Canyon's developed areas, no significant lion/human interactions have occurred. In fact, Eric's work demonstrated instead that humans have a serious impact on lions. During the study, the only confirmed mortalities of collared lions were caused by humans: two were killed by vehicle collisions on park roads and two by legal hunting outside the park.

An additional component of Eric's work for Grand Canyon's Division of Science and Resource Management was his active collaboration with interpretive staff for outreach and education about his research on lions in the park. This outreach, via ranger programs, site bulletins, and the Grand Canyon Web site (e.g., <http://www.nps.gov/grca/naturescience/200710mtlionkit.htm>), reached thousands of visitors each year.

Santa Monica Mountains carnivore study

Eric worked at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area for more than 10 years. He came to the park in 1995 after finishing his master's thesis on fisher ecology in Massachusetts. It was his first trip west of the Mississippi River and brought him to a new challenge: capturing and radio-collaring bobcats and coyotes in a complex urban landscape outside Los Angeles. This research is perhaps the longest-running continuous radio-tracking study of bobcats, and resulted in many important findings and publications about the ecology, behavior, and conservation of carnivores in urban areas. Eric was critical in the establishment of the carnivore study

from 1995 to 1998 and continued to assist with animal capture work through 2006. From the beginning, he was interested in studying mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains, where they had not been studied before and are perhaps the ultimate challenge for conservation in urban areas. Eric worked full-time in the Santa Monica Mountains from early 2002 through 2003 to begin a project using GPS radio collars in the study of mountain lion ecology and behavior in the park. He caught his first mountain lion in July 2002. The lion research project continues to provide critical information about how these animals move about, hunt, reproduce, and die in an urban landscape. Eric leaves an incredible legacy of important biological findings, colleagues trained and projects begun, and good friends made and kept.

Pneumonic plague

In 2007, Eric was monitoring nine collared lions in and around Grand Canyon National Park, and also collecting data on bighorn sheep, black bears, bobcats, coyotes, and other species. Two of the collared female lions produced litters last summer, and Eric found the kittens, which he ear-tagged to incorporate them in the study, by using the GPS locations of their mothers. A few days prior to his death, he found the mother of one of these litters dead and recovered her body to perform a postmortem examination.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed pneumonic plague as the cause of Eric's death. With the detection of the same strain of plague in the remains of the necropsied lion, the CDC concluded that Eric contracted the disease from the animal. While plague can be transmitted to humans through the bites of rodent fleas, Eric's exposure likely was through direct contact with the

infected lion. Although plague is endemic in northern Arizona, cases of pneumonic plague in humans are very rare. Eric's death reminds us of the inherent hazards, including the less obvious ones, that biologists are exposed to while working to manage and conserve wildlife. It is also a reminder to think about risks and how to mitigate them. The National Park Service is developing additional guidance to assist biologists in identifying risks and the appropriate work practices and personal protective equipment to make their job safer. Taking actions to ensure that a tragedy such as Eric's death never happens again is a way that all NPS employees can honor this great man.

In memory

Eric will be remembered as a biologist's biologist, and his expertise went far beyond that of his intimate knowledge of the lions and other species he tracked at Santa Monica Mountains and Grand Canyon. During his career Eric captured and tagged 23 different species of carnivores, and he worked in many areas of the United States and the world, including Pakistan, where he researched the elusive snow leopard, and Chile. In her comments at the celebration of his life held on the canyon rim on 15 November 2007, Elaine Leslie, Eric's former supervisor, said, "Eric was much like the lions he stalked. To catch a glimpse of the elusive Eric, you needed to be up at dawn as he hurried in and out of the office to gather up his freshly charged radio, dart pistol, and other tools of the trade. By sunrise you could find him on the carcass of a freshly killed deer or elk, carefully reading the signs and placing a snare. Then off he would run—yes, run—to check his traps."

She also said, "If you couldn't be Eric York, you at the very least wanted to hang out with him in the field and absorb every

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—Elaine Leslie

ounce of skill the man had to offer." Those who learned from Eric—be they NPS wildlife biologists, interpreters and educators, researchers in Chile and Pakistan, or his family and friends—will remember Eric by continuing his research and by sharing his passion for big cats, wildlife, and wild places.

Eric York was a native of Shelburne, Massachusetts. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Management from the University of Maine, and a Master of Science in Wildlife Conservation from the University of Massachusetts.

Cards, letters, and condolences may be sent to Eric's parents, Tony and Launie York, 180 S. Shelburne Road, Shelburne, MA 01370. Donations can be made in Eric's name to (1) The Grand Canyon Association, attn: Brad Wallis, P.O. Box 399, Grand Canyon, AZ 86023, www.grandcanyon.org; (2) Felidae Conservation Fund, 14 Cove Road, Belvedere, CA 94920, www.felidaefund.org; and (3) The Wildlands Fund, Division of Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife, attn: Julie, 1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westboro, MA 01581.