

## John Harrigan: Budgets, wolves and those cougars

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NORMALLY I would try to go on "Oprah" to do this, but I couldn't take the time or afford the fare to go to the Big City. So I have to do my confessing in print.

It's that I'm a sensitive, caring, feeling, New-Age guy. No laughter, please. This came into my mind when a reporter called me about a cougar sighting in the Concord area that's been getting a lot of attention. I mentioned, off-hand, that I'm a liberal pinko, or anarchist, or something like that. "Right," she said.

Type-casting can be a dangerous thing. While we might be conservative in some matters, we might be liberal in others. This is especially true with all of us who have a passion for the outdoors. A sitting President once said that fishing rods are the great levelers. I'm fairly sure it wasn't Coolidge, who was a man of fewer words ("You lose").

Much of my mail during this past week has concerned the Fish and Game budget, wolves and cougars. These are subjects that transcend politics, if not ideology.

Fish and Game is in dire straits financially because much of its modern mission is not paid for by all those who benefit.

People who hunt and fish, and who pay federal excise taxes on equipment, fund the lion's share of the department's expenses. The Legislature ponies up a paltry sum to help cover search and rescue. There is much lip service to billing people who need to get searched for or rescued, but it's just not that simple.

Meanwhile, a lot of people benefit from Fish and Game's programs, such as habitat protection, law enforcement, non-game species programs, and myriad others, without paying a dime. This is unfair to the department, and unfair to people who buy licenses.

In one of this past week's New Hampshire Union Leaders, I saw a letter from a man who was unhappy about being stopped and checked by conservation officers several times while he was using his boat and snowmachine. He said he'd be happy if the department would just go away.

Well, just take a look around. What if we'd had no moose protection laws or anyone to enforce them? What about the restoration of wild turkeys? What about poaching, and fish-hogging, and dozens of other issues involving the public and private sector and their mutual wildlife heritage? Come on. I'm always happy to see a warden appear out of nowhere. Check my license, please.

Wolves? They belong here and I'm for welcoming them back. But not with any government reintroduction. On their own four feet, thank you.

Does this make me a liberal, or what? Cougars? They're here. Proof? Maybe, some day, but who cares? There's no real need for a carcass in the road. Maybe this makes me a conservative.

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