The Eastern Cougar lives!
Well, maybe! At first glance that was what many thought when recent DNA analysis, from two hair samples collected at Fundy National Park came back positive for cougar. Publication of the results received national media attention. The debate about the existence of cougars in the Maritimes that had smouldered from time to time now flared into a larger wildlife management issue. Whence had Fundy’s cougars come?

Few wildlife issues in the Maritimes generate as much public interest and debate as that of the existence of the Eastern Cougar. Originally, listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as endangered in 1978 and then changed to “Data Deficient” in 1998, the eastern cougar has been described as “mythical” or as the “ghost of the forest.” On one side of the debate are those that have captured glimpses of these big cats in the wild and who swear by what they saw. They are backed by a database of hundreds of filed reports, many by credible observers, and numerous sightings that remained unreported due to fear of ridicule. On the other hand was the cool skepticism of science and management that wanted the hard evidence, a carcass, a photograph, or some other proof that cougars exist.

Providing that hard evidence is where Parks Canada stepped in. Starting in 2002, and initially supported by the Fundy Guild, a Parks Partnership group, and later by the Parks Canada Species at Risk Inventory Fund, three maritime national parks (Fundy, Kouchibouguac, and Cape Breton Highlands) decided to erect “cougar scent posts.” Baited with a lure made partially of cougar urine, the posts attract passing cougars that not only inspect the posts but rub up against them. In doing so, a cougar may unknowingly leave behind some hair, their genetic calling card. Twice monthly, wardens inspect the posts, collect any hair and send it to a laboratory at the University of Montreal for DNA analysis. After a long wait, two samples collected in July and October 2003 came back positive for cougar. The debate was on again.

The present focus of the debate surrounds three competing theories. One theory states that the cougars found in eastern Canada stem from a remnant population of Eastern cougars, a separate and distinct subspecies, which has always been here at low population levels. The second theory is often referred to as FERCs, an acronym for Feral-Escaped-Released Captive cougars. Backed by evidence that hundreds of cougars are kept in private hands, particularly in the United States, and that escapes or releases have occurred, this theory states that the population spreading in eastern Canada arises from these FERCs. The third theory is that these cougars are distant migrants from a cougar population which seems to be reestablishing itself in the United States and Canadian Midwest. Even with this group, debate surrounds their origin as either FERCs or migrant from the known populations further west in western North America.

To some, the debate may seem to be splitting hairs in that a cougar is a cougar. In reality, however, shedding light on the origin of these animals could have huge implications for how they are managed in the future. If it could be shown to be a remnant population of Eastern Cougars (serious scientific skepticism surrounds whether or not an identifiable subspecies ever existed), then they would get continued protection under the Species at Risk Acts both provincially and federally. If, on the other hand, they are proven to be FERCs or long distant migrants who are invading new territory in a way similar to the invasion of the maritime provinces by coyotes in the 1970s, then how they are managed may take on an entirely different slant. Unfortunately, the two positive samples collected in Fundy National Park in 2003 shed no light on this issue. In the mean time, all three parks will continue to collect hair samples for further analysis and perhaps enough samples of high enough quality may allow us to say more in the future. Stay tuned!