

Dave Maehr (1956–2008)

(memorial written by Darrell Land, Florida Panther Team Leader, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 18 November 2008)

On 20 June 2008, the wildlife profession lost one of its own. Dave Maehr, 52, and his pilot Mason Smoak were killed in a small plane crash near Lake Placid, Florida while monitoring radio-collared black bears. Dave was a professor at the University of Kentucky; he leaves behind his wife Diane and his two adult children Clif and Erin.



I first met Dave in the spring of 1984 in Gainesville, Florida; Dave was a bear biologist for the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission and I was just starting graduate school at the University of Florida. My graduate work was completed a year-and-a-half later and at the same time Dave became the new leader of the state's Florida panther team. One of Dave's first actions was to hire a temporary biologist to serve as a "toter and chopper" for this team. So, in December 1985, Dave and I headed to Naples, Florida and embarked upon a decade's worth of panther research and management together.

Dave was a strong-willed person with a tremendous inner drive to keep moving forward. He had a low tolerance and little patience for what he considered mediocrity. With each passing year and with each new panther publication, Dave became more convinced that a certain amount of wave-making was necessary to achieve long-term panther conservation goals.

Dave's tenure with the Commission began to unravel over a captive breeding program. In the early 1990s, the panther population consisted of 50 or fewer animals. The managing agencies decided to implement a captive-breeding program as a last-ditch effort to save the panther. Dave and his fellow panther biologists were unhappy with this decision because it moved our focus away from addressing the root of the problem – habitat loss throughout the panther's former and current range. Dave was adamant that the real solution was to provide opportunities for natural panther population expansion through large-scale conservation initiatives rather than micro-managing a relict population composed of wild and captive panthers. Unhappily in 1991, Dave and his panther team began the process of removing panther kittens from the wild and placing them in various captive breeding facilities. We completed these removals in August 1992.

Fast-forward 3 years to Monday, 24 January 1994. I was standing beside Dave in our office's small library as he inserted his resignation letter into the fax machine. One month earlier, we had received a letter from the Chief of the Bureau of Research within the Division of Wildlife that informed us that the panther capture season was on hold until a new plan could be developed. Dave and the agency had both decided it was time to change direction. Dave had already secured a job with a local consulting firm where he was going to try to put his panther expertise to work in the private sector. He had witnessed the confrontational relationships between private

landowners, developers, and regulatory agencies and felt there had to be a better way. Dave hoped to introduce his knowledge of panther biology and its habitat needs much earlier in the planning process so that fewer battles would be necessary down the road. In his spare time, Dave also enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Florida, wrote a book about the Florida panther and continued his history of publishing scientific articles.



Dave earned his PhD and accepted a position at the University of Kentucky (UK) in 1997. I had the great pleasure of making a couple of trips to Lexington to visit with Dave and his family. I had never seen Dave more content; he and academia fit each other like a hand in the proverbial glove. During his brief decade at UK, Dave became a full Professor, was involved in the largest elk restoration in the eastern U.S., initiated 3 research projects on bears (1 in Kentucky and 2 in Florida), and worked on many other research projects on various vertebrates. He was also a leader of the federal Ocelot Recovery Team and an active member of The Wildlife Society.

During those trips to Kentucky, I was fortunate to get to know many of his 27 graduate students and found them to be a loyal bunch, filled with the same kind of drive and passion as was Dave. When we all gathered this past June to provide comfort to the Maehr family and to say our good-byes to Dave, I was struck by the realization that Dave's professional legacy would truly live on through his students.

(Postscript)

Remember the controversial captive breeding program? Shortly after we removed the last of the 10 kittens into captivity, the US Fish and Wildlife Service approved the concept of "genetic restoration" whereby we could mix western puma genes into our panther population. This genetic management began in 1995 with the release of 8 female puma from Texas and appears to have been very successful at increasing panthers' genetic diversity. The 10 removed kittens matured in captivity but were never permitted to breed; only one of those panthers remains alive today.