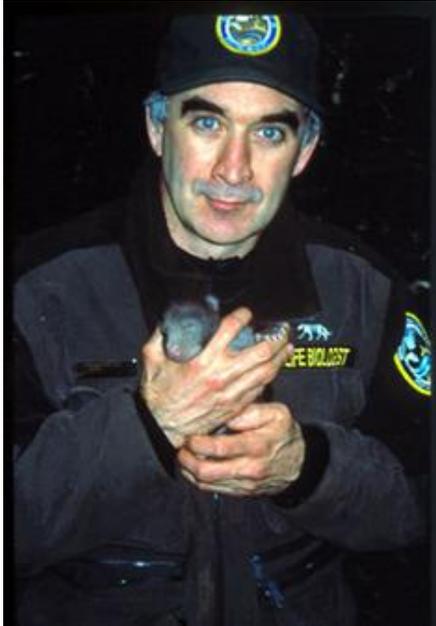


Rocky Spencer (1952–2007)

(by Gary M. Koehler, Wildlife Research Scientist, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife)



While capturing bighorn sheep in the Yakima Canyon of Washington State, Rocky Spencer, a passionate and dedicated manager, researcher, and advocate for wildlife, was killed in an accident during a helicopter flight. Rocky was employed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife for almost three decades, and he and the pilot were considered the 'best of the best' helicopter capture team in the Pacific Northwest. The team was a precision capture machine, as I discovered while working with them during research of American black bears in Washington.

Rocky's passion and dedication was keenly focused on cougars. He began studies of cougars nearly two decades ago, investigating their movements and use of space on the west slope of the Cascades. Recently, Rocky led a study in his Cascade Mountain backyard to investigate how cougars use habitats that were rapidly being transformed from rural woodlots to residential havens.

As part of a research and community outreach program known as Project CAT (Cougars and Teaching), Rocky led middle and high school students into their backyards to capture and mark cougars with GPS collars. Community members and newspaper and television reporters trailed as well, to witness and document these excursions. Rocky was a master teacher of students and of television audiences. His message was simple: we can live and recreate in cougar country if we understand cougars and manage our own behavior as well as managing cougars.

Those of us who have worked with cougars in the Western U.S. knew Rocky and his contributions. Rocky's independent (ask those who supervised him) and innovative character helped tailor the Department's message to effectively manage people and cougars to promote coexistence. Rocky was an advisor and mentor to all of us who cared about wildlife, and in particular those of us who cared about cougars and their management. He will be sorely missed.