

Opinion

See Page 10 for a guest editorial from former Leader publisher Scott Wilson

Learning from tragedy

Anthony had been learning new types of knots for several months. Why had he been practicing knots? No one knew. Perhaps more accurately, no one cared.

Sitting in our middle school biology class in an over-sized high-chair, he looped his hoody’s strings between his fingers, and slipped one end of the cord over the other, again and again.

After what seemed like seconds, he’d crafted a miniature noose. Anthony grabbed a number two pencil and looped the noose around the eraser, just above the copper, and dangled it in the air. I looked at him in awe.

How on earth had he mastered that knot so quickly? Now I cared.

He taught me how to do it in about five minutes.

This wasn’t unusual behavior for a 12-year-old in biology class. Our short attention spans got the best of us and those miniature skateboards had gone out of style months ago. In Cub Scouts, tying new knots was common. Hell, we got badges for it.

Anthony was (in my humble opinion) the most popular kid in the school. Granted, we graduated 43 students my senior year, but you could ask any one of my classmates and they’d tell you, Anthony was the top dog.

Take us out for recess and he’d be the team captain, regardless of the activity.

He lived in a castle north of town (I’ll leave it nameless to assuage the pain of his parents), yes, an actual castle that had been built by a mining company when a boom was on. It was a place for the big shots, and the miners on occasion, to celebrate. Those days are nearly a century in the rear view mirror.

When Anthony turned thirteen, a lucky few of us were invited to roam the halls and the dungeon. There were maybe 15 of us in all.

We started the festivities in the parlor and after the parents went to bed, we told each other ghost stories, each of us trying to make ours a bit more gross and unbelievable.

“This is a haunted castle,” he’d say. And with his parents asleep, we’d scurry from chamber to chamber.

Anthony would lag behind and make scratching noises along the walls to intensify the mood.

“A woman was tortured in this room. You can still hear her screams if you close the door and turn off the lights,” he said.

Naturally, Anthony closed the door and now I was the one screaming on the other side.

After too many seconds of agony and pounding on the door, threatening to release my bowels on the floor, the boys let me out of the room.

But it was all in good fun and we ended the night as most 13-year-olds do, talking about the girls we wanted to kiss and perusing the naughty magazines we’d stolen from our older siblings.

Less than a month after that birthday, Anthony used that knot he’d taught me in biology class to hang himself.

People said he and a friend were playing a trick on his mother. All I know is that the next time I saw my friend, he was in a coffin.

Suicide has reached epidemic proportions in this country and it’s easy to turn a blind eye. But sweeping tragedy under the rug is a poor way of addressing any issue, let alone trying to make change for the better.

In this week’s edition of your hometown newspaper, you’ll see a few stories about suicide in Jefferson County.

We hope the dialogue can help create a knowledge base from which we can impact this increasing problem.

Lloyd Mullen is the Publisher of the Port Townsend Leader. He writes the newspaper’s editorials and occasionally writes personal columns like this under the heading of Mullen It Over.



Lloyd Mullen
MULLEN IT OVER

PERSPECTIVE
Science has some answers

In reply to Karen Farr’s letter [Leader, April 10] where she posed several questions.

Are politicians deceiving us by talking about CO2 while ignoring water vapor? No, politicians do not hold Ph.Ds in science, instead they depend on earth scientists for advice.

Are hundreds of thousands of world-wide scientists knowingly deceiving the public? No. More than 97% of actively publishing earth scientists agree that our current climate change issue is real, caused by humans, and that lowering CO2 will help. Active scientists’ careers are based on their truthfulness and adherence to strict scientific methods, and their institutions’ reputations are based on the credibility of their staff. It is inconceivable that this majority would be engaged in deceit or thousands of publications would include overlooked errors. Climate change is corroborated by evidence from oceanography, glaciology, hydrology, biology, geology, meteorology, and atmospheric physics.

How are climate models formulated and is water vapor (or clouds) ignored? On average it takes 9-12 years to get a Ph.D in atmospheric physics, usually followed by a post-Doc position of three years. In addition to training, it requires years of data research, supercomputing, and incredibly complex math formulas to model climates. Not one single climate model, paper, or textbook fails to discuss the role that water vapor plays, as water vapor is the strongest greenhouse gas, contributing 36% to 66% to the overall effect for vapor alone, 66% to 85% including clouds. Why are scientists concerned about water vapor and CO2? Humans have no control over water vapor - we can’t add more water vapor than the atmosphere can hold, as it would rain out. Unlike water vapor, CO2 stays in the atmosphere for centuries, which is plenty of time to have long-lasting effects on the climate system. As the climate warms in response to CO2, humidity rises and increased H2O concentration acts as an amplifier of CO2-driven warming, doubling or tripling its effect.



CO2 in the atmosphere is naturally occurring, so why worry? Although CO2 is naturally introduced into the atmosphere from volcanic eruptions, forest fires, release from surface waters, and animal respiration, it is balanced by being removed and tied up into soils and rock, but the rock process takes millions of years, creating limestones and fossil fuel deposits. These natural slow processes normally protect us, but humans have opted to unlock CO2 and put it into the air by burning fossil fuels at an incredibly alarming rate.

Isn’t bulk of warming due to natural phenomenon? Yes, warming is a natural phenomenon, both internally and externally. The planet’s surface is warmed internally by volcanoes, fires, and frictional forces, and externally by the sun’s shortwave energy. The ground then reradiates the heat out as longwave (infrared) energy. Our atmosphere holds some of this heat like a blanket, absorbs ultraviolet light shielding us, and allows excess heat to radiate to space. It’s a

delicate balance that humans have upset.

What is the danger if ancient Earth atmospheres had 20 times higher CO2? In our Earth’s ancient past the atmosphere had higher levels of CO2; however, this has not occurred since humans have evolved. The “big five” mass extinctions in ancient Earth history have differing causes, but what these events had in common is that they occurred too rapidly for creatures to survive. We are changing our atmosphere and climate at a rate that outpaces these past calamities.

Why are we being misled? We aren’t being misled; however disavowing expertise and making science a partisan issue is misleading and ruinous.

Who benefits by curbing climate change? If we can curb climate change, avert the coming crisis, and avoid a human-caused mass extinction - we all benefit by living.

DR. MARY CHAPMAN, RESEARCH GEOLOGIST
PORT TOWNSEND

Mountain Lion in Port Townsend
a matter of when, not if

Pictures of a possible cougar kill at Fort Worden stoked Jefferson County’s rumor-mill last week. Whether the carcass was left by coyotes, cougars or collies, this is a good time for us to get some clarity about nature, red in tooth and claw.

Port Townsend is infested with deer and long has been, which means we can expect a mountain lion or two in our yards and streets.

The question isn’t whether they’re here. They will be if they aren’t already.

The real question is this: how tolerant will we be of a 100-pound obligate carnivore that hits 45mph and has been proven able to take down a healthy 600-pound bull elk?

Cougar attacks are rare. But they do happen in places just like this, so why not take this alert-but-calm moment to think before the time for emoting arrives?

Puma concolor (cat of one color) was once the widest-distributed carnivore on the continent, living in every ecosystem from southeastern cypress swamps to arid desert peaks, from the Yukon to the Andes. They’re incredibly adaptable.

Bounty hunters all but exterminated them by the 1960s, but the post-bounty-era rebound has been robust, with cougars refilling and recolonizing turf, feasting on out-of-control deer populations.

As cougar recovered, biologists began stunning the West with radio-collar maps: mountain lions were sleeping 10 feet from busy park trails in San Diego, bedding down in gullies in the heart of Portland and crossing the campus of Stanford University.

In 1992, an idling cabby found one in the parking garage of the Empress Hotel in downtown Victoria, just a hundred feet or so from the tea room where luminaries from Queen Elizabeth on down stop in to poke out their pinkies and sip tea.

Not every instance is as funny as the Empress mountain lion. The rare instances when they turn their eye from deer to humans end horribly, often for both the person and the cat.

So, which sort of cougar country is Jefferson County? Are we an Old Testament, dominion-of-man kind of place in which “terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky” (Genesis 9:2)?

Are we a place that reveres the first families of this peninsula – from plankton through orca and lichen through cougar - and accepts risks and costs to live side-by-side with them?

Or are we a place that will mix and match, tolerating the disappearance of dogs and cats, but occasionally using a heavy hand to rid cityscapes of the mountain lion?

What we can’t do is pretend nothing bad ever happens to people or animals.

I spent about five years, on and off, thinking and writing about this and what I found is not comforting, though it’s no cause for panic, either.

As a journalist working in eastern Washington and North Idaho in the 1990s, I noticed an increasing number of attacks. Teaming up with another writer, I convinced a Seattle



Dean Miller
UNEASY CHAIR

publisher to buy a book that tried to explain why there had been as many mountain lion attacks on humans in one decade as in the 100 preceding years.

We came up with no simple answer other than this: Late 20th century development in the West coincided with rapid cougar population growth. More opportunities for interaction meant more attacks.

There was otherwise no archetypal narrative binding the hundreds of attack stories. In all their variations, attacks happened when cats and people crossed paths in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Beyond that, the picture is complex. Wildlife and wild lands agencies urge us to protect children by sticking together on the trail, but 16 of 19 children attacked in the decade we studied were in groups. On the other hand, in the 1990s attacks we found that no child attacked in the company of an adult had died. In fact, rescuers, armed with sticks, rocks or even bare hands, are almost never hurt. But if you’re the hapless park ranger who dares speak that fact, you’ll be lawsuit roadkill.

The other advice, “avoid cougar country after dark,” is nonsensical. There have been far more attacks in the daylight than after dark. That’s probably more a result of humans’ preferences for day hiking than cougar hunting patterns. Put enough tourists on the trail and something may happen.

A few ideas Jefferson County law enforcement and state wildlife managers in Jefferson County should consider:

There are places where it’s irresponsible to move into the woods, fence in some chickens and llamas and indulge the idea that you are farming. If you lose livestock in the near-wild, is the state or county obligated to kill a cougar that hunts what it finds in its longtime ambit?

Are there are places in Jefferson County where cougars can just be cougars and we go there at our own risk? Olympic National Park and the federal forestlands around it aren’t in need of cougar control. They’re a good place for humans to re-learn their place in the natural order, which means accepting risk.

And are there places where cougars don’t belong? A cougar that allows itself to be seen and, worse, confronts humans, is a higher risk. Cougars are not endangered nor even threatened. Killing that cat won’t put the species at any risk.

How terrific if we were to be an exceptional place that gives support to wildlife officers when a righteous killing is needed. How sad if we turn out to be one of those towns that indulges the worst fantasy of all: the transplant.

Live TV loves the story of the sober officer tranquilizing and caging an urban cougar and driving into the sunset to set the cat free to romp with chipmunks and butterflies. In fact, the cat will be extremely vulnerable while it recovers from being drugged. Dropped in unfamiliar territory, it will have a very difficult time feeding itself. And when discovered by the cat into whose territory it has been dumped, the intruder will be stalked and killed or badly injured.

So, before there’s an emergency, it’s a good time to make calm decisions about what we will and will not tolerate.

Dean Miller is Editor of The Leader. He conceived and co-wrote “Cat Attacks: True Stories and Hard Lessons from Cougar Country,” for Sasquatch Books, a Random House-owned publisher based in Seattle.