



# The Lynx “Biofraud” Myth

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*In December, 2001, the Washington Times ran a story about lynx biologists in Washington State. The story implied that a number of biologists, employees of the US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife had conspired to defraud the public by planting lynx hairs into a wide ranging habitat survey to back some sort of secret, illicit environmental agenda.*

*Before agency scientists had a chance to respond, a number of politicians jumped into the fray, demanding hearings, investigations and even termination of the scientists involved.*

*The biggest victim in this political quagmire has been the truth. A review of the record of this case demonstrates conclusively that this has been more a matter of political posturing than scientific wrongdoing. A number of key points have been obscured and should be illuminated:*

- **Control samples were submitted to test the accuracy of the lab.** A number of biologists familiar with the survey had expressed concern that the lab was not set up to handle hundreds of hair samples without contamination, making errors and false positives possible. The controversial hair samples were submitted in order to test the lab. (*US Forest Service Investigation Report, pp. 3,14*)
- **The biologists did not try to hide the fact that they had submitted control samples.** In each situation, the scientists noted in their station or field notes that blind control samples had been sent to the labs. Anyone evaluating the data would have read those notes. In one of the cases, a Forest Service biologist went so far as to inform the lab that one of his samples was a blind control. (*US Forest Service Investigation Report, p. 17*)
- **None of the control samples were used in an official survey.** If the biologists had intended to skew the survey results, they would have included the control samples in the survey results. In fact, no false samples were included in the results from the 1999 or 2000 interagency lynx survey. (*Statement from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Chief Scientists, p. 2*)
- **Hair samples were not planted in the field.** The *Washington Times* reported

that biologists planted hair samples on rubbing posts in national forests--a point emphasizing that the biologists actions were a deliberate attempt to defraud the public. A press release from Representatives Hansen and McInnis charged that employees had even admitted doing so. This is not true. The employees simply included the hair with other samples sent to the lab, consistent with the objective of a blind control. (*US Forest Service Investigation Report, pp. 9-11*)

- **No land management decision has been affected by the scientists' actions.** No federal or state agency has stopped a single project based on the scientist's blind sampling (*"Lynx-fur furor focuses on science role," Seattle Times, December 30, 2001*).
- **False positives would have led to broader research.** Even if one of the blind control samples had been incorporated into the survey, it would not have had a major impact. Positive results where none were expected would have only led to a broader sampling effort, which would have clarified the situation (*Interviews with independent lynx biologists*).
- **Federal agencies have not promoted protections for the lynx; the listing decision came after a decade of litigation.** Contrary to assertions that there has been some federal "plot" to use the lynx as a pretext for curbing private uses of land, the US Fish & Wildlife Service vigorously resisted listing the lynx as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. The listing was accomplished only after years of litigation against the agency (*see, for example, PEER white paper War of Attrition, 1997*).
- **This all happened quite some time ago and is not an ongoing concern.** The original samples were submitted in 1998 and 1999 in connection with the 1999 and 2000 annual surveys. (*US Forest Service Investigation Report, pp. 10-11*)
- **Politics, not the scientists, have undermined public faith in the survey.** While political opportunists have tried to blame scientists for the public's perception of the lynx case, this would never have been an issue had certain members of Congress not attempted to try the biologists in the press.
- **The matter has already been investigated.** The US Forest Service completed an extensive investigation into the lynx case this year. The investigation found that the biologists had not violated the law, nor had they attempted to influence the survey results. The actions of the staff were found to be of minor culpability. While direct supervisors were informed of the actions, other agency leads were not consulted. As a result, the federal scientists received "counseling," the lowest level of discipline possible and an action so minimal it is not challengeable under civil service rules. (*US Forest Service Investigation Report; 5 USCS § 7512*)