

Panther expert killed in crash

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LAKE PLACID — An expert on the endangered Florida panther died Friday in a plane crash in south-central Florida.

Dave Maehr, 52, a professor with the University of Kentucky, was conducting aerial surveys of black bear in Highlands County, according to the *News-Sun* in Highlands County.

The crash also killed Mason Smoak, a citrus grower from the area.

"He was known throughout North America and probably throughout the world for his body of work," said Darrell Land, who leads the panther team of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in Naples. "That will continue, but he'll be sorely missed."

Maehr began studying panthers in 1985 when little was known about the severely endangered animals. Scientists estimated only about 30 remained in the wild at the time. He and Land studied almost everything about them — their eating habits, habitat and breeding.

The research affected conservation in South Florida for years, restricting where developers could build and determining which lands the state or county bought to protect panther habitat. The panther population is now estimated at about 100.

Maehr leaves a wife and two grown children, Land said.

"It's very unfortunate," said Thomas W. Reese, an attorney who represents the Florida Wildlife Federation and Collier County Audubon Society. "He's a very good panther and bear biologist and he did an awful lot of field work. ... Much of the work they do is by small planes and it is hazardous."

As the principal researcher of a fiercely protected species, his work came under fire. In 2004, environmental groups released a report that said his research was biased and that federal agencies allowed the destruction of habitat by relying on it. A key issue was how far and where panthers would roam. Maehr used daytime tracking research to show they wouldn't travel more than 300 feet between forests, though some said the nocturnal range would be different.

A recent study by the wildlife commission found that panthers do spend much of their time in forests, even during the night. Land said his findings are holding up despite further research and changes in technology.

"Science is always changing," Reese said. "It wasn't total bad science, it just wasn't total correct science."

Information from the Naples Daily News was used in this report. Stephanie Garry can be reached at (727) 892-2374.