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Former area couple rescues Michigan cougars - 04/12/2004

DIRECTO

Michael and Cheryl (Mehki) Tuller run WildCat Haven in Oregon.

Board to cc library milla 04/12/2004

By DEAN COUSINO

Evening News staff writer

Former are rescues Mi cougars - 0

Thanks to two Ida High School graduates and a third rescuer, two Michigan cougars on the brink of being killed have found a safe place to spend the rest of their lives.

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Michael and Cheryl Tuller of Sherwood, Ore., are making sure the 6-year-old cougars won't be threatened with extermination again. The couple is housing the small wildcats at their WildCat Haven, a reserve facility for abused, abandoned and neglected captive-born wildcats.

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"This is their last stop," Mrs. Tuller, 49, said Saturday from the sanctuary where the cougars arrived April 3.

The sanctuary is located on eight wooded acres in a secluded mountaintop area about 25 miles south of Portland.

"It's peaceful and safe here, just what they need to live out the remainder of their lives," she said.

The cougars -- a male named D.J. and a female named Nada -- were rescued from a Cassopolis, Mich., home where they were kept as pets and housed inside two 5-by-10-foot pens in a barn. At WildCat Haven, they are temporarily living in a 20-by-30-foot enclosure. The couple is building larger pens that will be 40-by-60-feet when they're done, about eight times larger than the tiny pens they had in Michigan.

"The difference is incredible," Mrs. Tuller said. "Right now they're out lying in sunshine and smelling fresh air. In Michigan, they were just a novelty for him (the previous owner). They lived in isolation, side by side in two very small pens. It was like a prison within a prison."

D.J. still limps from a crippled right leg from an unknown injury or defect probably caused by his cramped quarters the past six years, she said.

She credited Tammy Quist, director of a wildlife sanctuary in Cedar, Minn., with spearheading the rescue and placing the animals with the Tullers. Ms. Quist notified the Tullers after learning that the Michigan Department of Natural Resources had removed the cats from the owner.

WildCat Haven houses 35 wildcats that range in age from 6 months to 24 years. The average life expectancy for cats is 20 years. There are 37 wildcat species and the haven houses nine of them, Mrs. Tuller said.

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Both Mr. and Mrs. Tuller graduated from IHS in 1973. Their families still live in Monroe County. The couple moved to Oregon in 1987 and later opened the sanctuary, which is fully licensed and operates on a shoestring budget.

"It's a labor of love," Mrs. Tuller, the former Cheryl Mehki, said. "It's a lot of work and very expensive. We're one of a handful of people who work with small cats (like cougars). Other sanctuaries house the bigger cats like lions and tigers."

She and Mr. Tuller, 49, work full-time. They work opposite shifts so that someone can stay home to run the sanctuary.

The sad plight of the two cougars is a common occurrence with exotic pets like wildcats. Most cats have three to five different owners. The story of D.J. and Nada has a happy ending, but that isn't always the case.

"We see this all the time," she noted. "People buy them as pets because they're adorable as babies. But once they get older, they can't feed them and the breeders won't take them back. So they get discarded. Often they get euthanized."

She said there should be laws to stop breeders from selling the animals as pets. She said the general public needs to be educated that wildcats are not pets and should not be kept as pets.

"People are ill-prepared to care for them, and the only thing that suffers is the cat."

To contact WildCat Haven, call (503) 625-0812. The Web site is www.wildcathaven.org

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