

# Fur flies over lynx survey's suspect samples

Rex Dalton, San Diego

A study of the habitat of the threatened Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) in US forests is embroiled in fierce controversy, after it emerged that wildlife biologists sent fur samples from captive lynx to a laboratory that was supposed to be monitoring the whereabouts of the animals in the wild.

The *Washington Times* published allegations last month that the biologists were seeking to distort a national survey of the lynx by planting the captive animals' fur in the forest.

Critics of wildlife-conservation measures in the United States — including powerful figures in both Congress and the Bush administration — have pounced on the allegations, claiming that they confirm their worst fears about how far government scientists will go to justify wildlife protection.

But the biologists involved hotly deny any intent to deceive, saying that the samples were never “planted” in the forest, but were sent to the laboratory to check that it was testing properly.

The existence of Canada lynx in the western United States is a highly charged political issue. Under the 1973 Endangered Species Act, areas that are populated by the threatened cat are subject to restrictions on logging, mining and public access.

The population has been monitored

since 1998 by a national lynx-detection programme, conducted by the US Department of Agriculture's Forest Service in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal and state agencies. Under the scheme, biologists place scratch pads in the forest to snag lynx hair, which is then submitted to a laboratory to confirm its identity.

In 1998, federal officials say, a private contractor hired to carry out the survey's first season found the lynx in several forest regions in Washington state. The next year, biologists at the Forest Service took over the study, but found the lynx in only one region of the state.

But in 2000, confusion arose among the various state and federal biologists who were sending samples for DNA analysis to the Forest Service's Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Missoula, Montana. In interviews and statements, several biologists questioned the laboratory's capabilities.

These concerns prompted seven wildlife biologists — in at least three independent instances at three separate agencies — to submit samples of captive lynx hair as ‘blind controls’. “Everyone in the field was questioning the DNA analysis,” says Jeffrey Bernatowicz, a biologist at the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, “so people sent in control samples independently.”

When these controls came to the attention of the Forestry Service over a year ago, the

agency hired a private Oregon firm to investigate. Last summer, the firm reported details of the control-sample methods, and the seven biologists were removed from the survey.

Although none of the ‘control’ specimens was included in the detection programme's data, the survey may now be discredited. The episode is being investigated by the inspector generals of two US government departments, and Congressional hearings are likely. ■



Lynx the loser: the plight of the endangered cat may be overshadowed by political jostling.

BBC WILD

# Charges over computing project may set precedent

Erika Check, Washington

SETI@home users beware — aiding the quest for extraterrestrial intelligence could land you on the wrong side of the law.

Computer administrator David McOwen faces prosecution by the state of Georgia after he downloaded distributed-computing software — which divides time-consuming computing problems among many machines

— onto computers at DeKalb Technical College, where he worked two years ago.

Millions of users have installed the distributed SETI@home software, which analyses radio signals from space to search for signals from extraterrestrial life. McOwen had downloaded software from distributed.net, a website that specializes in software for tackling mathematical problems such as encryption.

McOwen, who is expected to face trial later this month, has been charged under Georgia's computer-hacking law. This law prohibits altering or interfering with computer data “with knowledge that such use is without authority”. Similar laws exist in other states.

But David Joyner, McOwen's lawyer, says that his client did not violate any clear written policies. “It's inherent in his position to have the authority to run whatever program he felt like he needed to run,” he says. Joyner adds that students at the college downloaded SETI@home software without being arrested.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, a San

Francisco-based group that campaigns on civil-liberty issues related to information technology, says that the case — the first of its kind — has worrying implications. “We've had a number of people, primarily in the mathematical world, tell us this is scary, because there are clearly good things that can be done with distributed software,” says Lee Tien, a lawyer for the organization.

One popular program, the Great Internet Mersenne Prime Search, lets users search for prime numbers of the form  $2^n - 1$ . A record-breaking four-million-digit prime number was found last November. Researchers at the University of Oxford are using a distributed computing project to screen small molecules for promising leukaemia drug candidates, and have signed up more than a million users since the project was launched last April.

Dave McNett, president and co-founder of distributed.net, denies that distributed computing projects are in danger. “I think this has raised awareness that you shouldn't run software on machines you don't own without permission,” he says. “That has always been our policy.” ■

