

CAT news

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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome
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Guidelines for authors are available at www.catsg.org/catnews

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Cover Photo: Adult male black-footed cat on
Benfontein Nature Reserve,
Northern Cape Province, close to
Kimberley, South Africa
Photo: Alexander Sliwa

Legends live on: a tribute to Mel Sunquist (1941–2026), mentor, friend, colleague

Melvin E. “Mel” Sunquist, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation at the University of Florida (UF), peacefully passed away on 9 May 2026. Mel was a towering figure in wildlife ecology and conservation biology. To those of us who had the privilege of knowing him personally, he was not only an exceptional human being, friend and colleague, but also a talented storyteller, a generous mentor, and a profoundly kind individual. For many years, Mel was a pivotal figure at the University of Florida, where he educated countless undergraduate and graduate students through courses such as Carnivore Ecology and Conservation, Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Wildlife Field Techniques, and Wildlife of Florida. Students were drawn to his teaching because Mel had a unique talent for bringing ecology and conservation biology to life. His lectures seamlessly transitioned from discussing tiger behaviour in Nepal to ocelots, jaguars, and small carnivores in the Neotropics, sloths in Panama, black bears in Florida, or sharing an unforgettable field story that conveyed a broader lesson about ecology, conservation, or the art of observing wildlife with care and honesty.

Mel's international acclaim also attracted students from across the globe to the University of Florida, including me. Over the years, Mel served on advisory boards and collaborated closely with various conservation organizations, significantly influencing carnivore conservation and wildlife science beyond the university. Within the global conservation community, Mel was nothing short of a legend. He belonged to a generation of ecologists whose knowledge of wildlife came not only from statistics and models but also from years in the field watching and learning the natural history of the animals living in the landscapes they inhabited, the essence of a true naturalist.

For many young ecologists worldwide, particularly those interested in carnivores and tiger conservation, Mel was a monumental figure long before they met him in person. He helped lay the scientific foundation for modern tiger biology through rigorous fieldwork under extraordinarily difficult conditions. His Smithsonian monograph, *The Social Organization of Tigers (Panthera tigris)* in Royal Chitawan National Park, Nepal, remains a classic in carnivore ecology and continues to shape tiger research and conservation today. His book “Wild Cats of the World”, co-authored with his wife and lifelong collaborator Fiona Sunquist, is a benchmark and remains a key reference for anyone interested in felids. Together with Fiona, Mel also inspired generations of scientists, students, and naturalists through a series of beautifully written books, including *Wild Cats of the World*, *Tiger Moon: Tracking the Great Cats in Nepal*, *The Wild Cat Book*, *Mammals of Florida*, and *Florida: The Ecotraveller's Wildlife Guide*. These books have opened the world of wildlife conservation and carnivore ecology to countless readers worldwide.

Mel is survived by Fiona, his daughter Claire, granddaughter Camille, son-in-law Travis, and a worldwide network of past students, colleagues, collaborators, and friends who were positively impacted by his presence. His influence endures through the ecologists and conservationists he mentored, the scientific contributions he made, and the ongoing preservation of the remarkable animals and environments he dedicated his life to. Many of today's prominent carnivore ecologists, tiger biologists, conservation scientists, and wildlife managers can trace part of their academic heritage back to Mel. His impact on the field endures through his students, collaborators, and generations of wildlife biologists he mentored.

Writing this was not an easy task. I always say that I am an “offspring” of Mel Sunquist, forged and sculpted academically/scientifically by him at the University of Florida's “school of conservation”. Through his guidance, I learned the art of scientific writing, where he showed me the best way to convey ideas, guiding my hands. As his teaching assistant for the “Wildlife Field Techniques” course at the Ordway Preserve, he taught me the art of live trapping and handling carnivores. Two of my best pieces of work were related to Mel; in one, he was by my side, and the other was dedicated to him while he was still alive. When I met him and he accepted to become my advisor, I was smiling from ear to ear, but when Fiona mentioned to me that he was very proud of me, I cried like a baby. Today, the path I have taken, the career I have made, and the professional I have become have been shaped by Mel Sunquist. If today I sit as the Co-Chair of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, it has his DNA. Those that work closely with me and that I have been able to help in their careers, in the same way he helped me, feel like grandchildren of the legendary Mel Sunquist. It is an honour to carry on his legacy. His legend will live on.



Mel and the author reunited in 2005 at a Cat Specialist Group meeting in southern Brazil.

Tadeu De Oliveira
(Drawing on the obituary Madan Oli wrote for the University of Florida)