

BETH PRATT

# Tattoo

For a lonely cougar

After twenty-five years of campaigning to protect wildlife and the environment, I finally stumbled on a surefire way to break through the noise and get my message across: get a tattoo.

Admittedly, this takes the concept of wearing your heart on your sleeve to the extreme. It also precludes me from ever changing careers. But if you think you're in the field of conservation for the long haul—and can abide the thought of needles—body art is an option to consider.

The tattoo started as a personal gesture of commitment. It wound up a clarion call for protecting wildlife that was more effective than any press release I've ever sent. It attracted the attention of the BBC, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

I discovered this quite accidentally. What prompted me to get inked in middle age, one month (sorry, Mom) before my wedding? Earlier this year, I had dinner with Jean and Jerry, two friends and long-time supporters of my employer, the National Wildlife Federation. Both had recently retired from practicing law, but continued to devote time to causes they felt passionate about, including bison conservation.

Conversation with these two friends is invariably fascinating, ranging from Japanese art to wild-bird rehabilitation. But I was completely caught off guard when Jerry, while sipping a fine Cabernet from his wine cellar, rolled up his sleeve to reveal a gorgeous profile of a bison on his upper arm. I was so surprised I almost dropped my glass. "Is that one of those temporary henna tattoos?" He assured me that it was permanent.

At age seventy-five, Jerry had gotten his first tattoo. I asked the obvious question. "Why?"

"It just seemed like a really good way to show commitment to the bison."

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The author's tattoo.

Around the time Jerry made his next-level commitment to the bison, I had begun to develop a campaign in the Santa Monica Mountains to ensure the survival of the area's mountain lions. In February of 2012, I had come across a news article about a cougar, now known to the world as P22, living in the heart of Los Angeles. Incredulous, I contacted biologist Jeff Sikich, the researcher mentioned in the article. Jeff agreed to take me on a tour of P22's adopted homeland of Griffith Park. He explained that P22 miraculously crossed two eight-lane highways in a desperate move to find a home. The cat was now marooned in this small urban island of green space surrounded by a spider web of LA freeways and sprawl, facing a lonely bachelorhood for the rest of his days unless he braved the ocean of traffic once more.

Like many Angelenos, I rallied around P22. After all, so many of us can relate to being single and isolated and paralyzed by LA's traffic problems.

When I asked Jeff how I could help, he answered, "Well, there's this wildlife crossing we've been trying to get built..."

I gave Jeff my word that I would help make it happen.

I've worked in both Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks, and been involved with a myriad of wildlife projects. Yet nothing has inspired me more than helping to build what might be the largest wildlife crossing in the world over one of the busiest freeways in the country to help stave off the threat of extinction for Los Angeles County's mountain lions and other animals struggling to survive in the midst of the city.

As I became more involved in the campaign, I kept thinking about Jerry's tattoo. The conservation project that P22 inspired—even though it will not help him directly—had become the largest project I have ever been involved with; I wanted to mark the occasion. Besides, didn't Stephen Covey or one of those motivational speaker-types say you



COURTESY OF FLICKR USER SALLY CROSSTHWAITE.

are more likely to complete your goals if you write them down? Surely, if P22 had the courage to cross two major freeways, I could honor him with a little bravery of my own. This wasn't a love affair that would fade over time. P22 changed the course of my career and opened my eyes to the importance of urban wildlife conservation. A radical gesture was required to honor my muse.

Making this even more poignant for me, the adventurous cat will very likely end up a martyr for the cause. He found a home—and captured the imagination of people around the world—yet he's no success story. He's trapped, facing a very risky journey if he tries to leave Griffith Park. Relocation is rarely successful for mountain lions, so that's not considered a viable option either.

One day after a campaign meeting, I sat in my car and, with the assistance of Yelp, found the Brass Anchor Tattoo and Barbershop in Woodland Hills. It was reviewed as the best place to get a haircut, tattoo, and a brew. While combining those particular activities had never occurred to me, I liked the sound of the place. Yelpers liked that they served Pabst Blue Ribbon; someone tagged the place as “super chill.” Another reviewer wrote, “I took my wife here to get her first tattoo.” I was sold.

If Luis, my tattoo artist, was surprised that a middle-aged woman in business dress wanted to talk tattoos, he didn't show it. He treated me like any other customer. His body of work was incredible—the pieces were colorful, imaginative, and vivid. I could sense the story behind each one. Any hesitation I had melted away.



COURTESY OF FLICKR USER CCHAUVET.

I showed Luis the most famous photo of P22 in front of the Hollywood Sign, from *National Geographic*. Luis designed a tattoo that paid homage to the cat's spirit—and of such fine detail that his eyes leap out at you from my arm. I couldn't be happier. It's a permanent reminder of my life's work. As a traditional Samoan tattoo artist sings, “Your necklace may break, the fau tree may burst, but my tattooing is indestructible. It is an everlasting gem that you will take into your grave.”

In September 2014, #SaveLACougars had its official launch in Agoura Hills, the site of the proposed crossing Jeff Sikich mentioned to me back in 2012. It's a vibrant wildlife corridor in northwestern Los Angeles County, but it's about thirty miles from P22's home in Griffith Park. My muse will never benefit from it, yet it will help ensure that the extended family of mountain lions he left behind will have access to wilder places and, perhaps, not have to brave the same kind of dangerous journey to find room to roam by sneaking through Bel Air and Beverly Hills and dodging traffic on major highways.

I've since learned that I am a relative lightweight when it comes to using body art to show commitment to cause. I recently discovered Carl Zimmer's book *Science Ink: Tattoos of the Science Obsessed* along with multiple blogs and Pinterest boards showcasing the people who ink their passions. One lonely mountain lion seemed rather small potatoes when compared to the entire solar system spreading across a person's back, or the molecular structure of fulvic acid covering an entire arm.





COURTESY OF FLICKR USER DEANNA WARDIN.

Still, the striking visage of a mountain lion offers an easier conversation starter than a molecule. About a month after getting the tattoo, I learned my personal pledge had potential as a public relations tool. I was standing in a café about three hundred miles outside of LA, waiting for my lunch when a complete stranger, conservatively dressed, approached me.



COURTESY OF FLICKR USER MEZ LOVE.

“How’s he doing?” she asked and gestured to my tattoo.  
“I read that he had mange.”  
“You know P22?”  
“Sure. He’s the mountain lion in National Geographic. Loved the story. Nice tat.”  
“He’s doing better now,” I said, “though he’s still lonely. But we’re working on that.” **B**