

The Long and Winding Road of Jaguar Conservation

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NATURALIA, A.C. / NJP

A pair of Sonoran jaguars stalks the land. Photo credit: Naturalia

In twists and turns, efforts are mounting to protect the Americas’ biggest wild cat. A Mexican initiative, the National Alliance for Jaguar Conservation, unites non-governmental and governmental organizations in a new and “ambitious” program aimed at saving an emblematic creature, says Dr. Gerardo Ceballos, Alliance member and coordinator of the National Autonomous University of Mexico’s Ecology Institute.

The campaign’s centerpiece is an Alliance proposal for two long biological corridors dedicated to jaguar conservation. Contouring jaguar habitats of about 10 million acres, the first corridor is envisioned to run between the state of Tamaulipas and the Yucatan Peninsula in eastern Mexico; the second one would extend from Sonora to Chiapas in the western side of the country.

“We think we will have a strong impact on jaguar conservation,” Ceballos says.

Accordingly, the Mexican Senate is reviewing an Alliance proposal to classify the biological corridors as a type of natural protected area, the biologist said.

In addition to the national university's Ecology Institute, members of the Alliance include the World Wildlife Fund-Telcel and the federal government's National Commission of Protected Areas.

According to Ceballos, Mexico's jaguar population plunged from an estimated 20,000 animals at the beginning of the 20th century to 4,000 calculated during a 2009-2011 census. An updated Mexican jaguar census is planned for 2016 while a hemispheric one is in the works for 2017, he says.

Ceballos adds that a Latin American symposium devoted to the creature of legend and lore will held in Mexico City next May.

Located in the southeastern state of Quintana Roo on the Yucatan Peninsula near Cancun, the private El Eden Ecology Reserve supports the Alliance's mission.

Marco Antonio Lazcano Barrero, general director of the approximately 6600 acre nature reserve, stressed that the Yucatan, where nearly half of Mexico's jaguar population is found, is crucial for preserving an endangered species.

Outstanding threats to Quintana Roo's jaguars include poaching, habitat loss from touristic and urban development, rampant deforestation and climate change, Lazcano says.

Underscoring the importance of involving rural dwellers in jaguar preservation, Lazcano stresses that locals have been extremely helpful in protecting El Eden's jaguars from poachers. "This has cut (poaching) down to almost zero," he says.



A jaguar captured by camera during night at El Eden Ecology Reserve, Quintana Roo, Mexico

For Lazcano, protecting jaguars means protecting larger ecosystems. In a short paper, he terms the predatory animal a "keystone" or a "flag" species, positing that saving the Yucatan jaguar will translate into the survival of forests, wetlands, caves and underground river systems, which are "essential for the maintenance of the northernmost portion of the second largest barrier reef in the

world-” a reference to the beautiful coral reef shelf that extends from near Cancun south to Honduras in the western Caribbean.

According to Lazcano, protecting the land of the jaguar in the Yucatan benefits the habitat of migratory birds from Canada, the U.S. and northern Mexico,. Citing studies, he calculates that more than 215 species of migratory birds can be found in the Yucatan at one time or another.

Last month, Lazcano traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he delivered his message in a public talk.



**An aerial view of El Eden Ecology Reserve on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula
Photo Credit: El Eden**

Given that jaguars cross borders, protecting the big cats in Mexico involves the United States and Central America, where the Alliance would like to connect land corridors that are viewed by experts as essential for the species' genetic health.

Once native to the U.S., jaguars were the target of an official federal government extermination campaign and widely considered extinct in this country; the last documented female jaguar in the U.S. was killed in Arizona in 1963. However, several male animals have been spotted and/or photographed in the southern border areas of Arizona and New Mexico since 1996. Balam, the sacred symbol of the Mayas, was back in its northern haunts.

Experts trace the contemporary presence of jaguars in the U.S. Southwest to the wanderings of males from across the border in the Mexican state of Sonora, though the presence of females, which would imply the reestablishment of a breeding population, cannot be discounted.

Oscar Moctezuma, founder and director of Naturalia, a Mexican non-governmental organization that operates a large jaguar reserve in Sonora, estimates that 150 jaguars live in the northern state. Protecting the few jaguars that may be in the United States has proven a thorny issue.

In 2014, as a result of successful litigation pursued by the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), designated last year nearly 1,200 square miles of combined critical jaguar habitat in the southern borderlands of Arizona and New Mexico.

The court victory notwithstanding, the Center for Biological Diversity's Michael Robinson contends that the critical habitat designation didn't go far enough, and should have included more areas near the border as well as farther into the interior.

"The big area that should have been protected and wasn't, was the Gila area of New Mexico where I live and the Mogollon Rim of Arizona," Robinson says.

Steve Spangle, Arizona field supervisor for the USFWS, says his agency based its geographic designation on evidence of recent jaguar presence, not "rumors," in identifying the area south of Interstate 10 as the suitable zone for critical habitat. The USFWS is developing a final jaguar recovery plan, which will be published in the Federal Register for public comment.

Jeff Humphrey, public affairs specialist for the USFWS in Arizona, adds that the agency does not have a "solid target date" yet for the publication of the plan, but anticipates the spring of 2016.

Differences between the USFWS and Robinson's organization aside, the Center for Biological Diversity along with Defenders of Wildlife have intervened on the side of the federal government in a pending New Mexico court case challenging the critical habitat designation.

Last May, the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association and the New Mexico Federal Lands Council filed suit in U.S. District Court in Albuquerque seeking to overturn the USFWS' critical jaguar habitat designation of 170 square miles in New Mexico.

According to plaintiffs' attorneys, tens of thousands of acres have been "illegally" impacted for a "phantom" animal that has not been sighted in the specific area in question for years.

The suit asserts the USFWS violated the Endangered Species Act when the jaguar was listed in 1972, because the area in dispute was not occupied by the animal at the time and is "not essential for jaguar conservation."

Although conceding that there have been some sightings of jaguars in southern Arizona and New Mexico's Hidalgo County since 1972, the lawsuit is based on the premise that the jaguar is mainly a tropical animal with a marginal presence in the U.S. Southwest at best.

The New Mexico plaintiffs contend that not only would their livelihoods and economic pursuits be disturbed by the critical habitat designation, but that fire control in area forests could be impacted.

"The determination that designated critical habitat in New Mexico is essential for species conservation is arbitrary and capricious," the lawsuit states.

But according to jaguar conservation advocate Robinson, evidence exists that jaguars actually evolved in the upper parts of North America and then spread south to their present range. 400 years ago, they even roamed the future continental U.S. between the modern states of California and North Carolina, he says.

In a declaration filed in the New Mexico lawsuit, the Defenders of Wildlife's Craig Miller argues that the small jaguar population in northern Sonora must expand to Arizona and New Mexico to remain viable.

So far, no litigation challenging the larger Arizona jaguar critical habitat zone has surfaced.

While not commenting directly on the New Mexico lawsuit, Spangle says the critical habitat designation does not affect hunting or grazing but forces federal agencies that might have activities within the zone to first consult with the USFWS on jaguar concerns.



**The Northern Jaguar Reserve in Sonora, Mexico.
Photo Credit: Naturalia**

Naturalia's Oscar Moctezuma strongly backs international cooperation as critical for the jaguar's survival, saying his organization maintains relationships with Defenders of Wildlife and like-minded U.S. organizations.

Though few in number, Sonora's jaguars enjoy certain advantages over their southern counterparts, benefiting from isolated ranges and lower human population densities, Moctezuma says.

To curb poaching, Naturalia has implemented a program of installing cameras in jaguar habitat and paying ranchers approximately \$300 for each picture snapped of a jaguar, in return for agreements that the predators won't be killed.

Saving jaguars, he insists, is not only important on its own merits, but also crucial for preserving the complexity and richness of "biodiversity in the country." Indeed, the charisma-and even sexiness-of jaguars, captures the public's imagination and focuses attention on larger environmental questions, he affirms.

Despite the myriad challenges, Moctezuma and other jaguar defenders say they are firmly committed to the big and elusive cat. "This is a long and complex arena that will take time, but we are in it," the conservationist said.

"It's heartening that efforts are being made on a continental scale," Robinson adds. "We need to look at how this original (Southwestern) range of the jaguar can contribute to the continental efforts."

-Kent Paterson

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