



Jaguar Conservation Program

Environmental education to promote jaguar conservation in Belize.

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Abstract:

Jaguars (*Panthera onca*) have been part of the environment, culture and mythology of human beings for thousands of years. In pre-Colombian civilizations in Mexico and Central America, the jaguar had high ritual significance. In the Maya culture, the creation myth holds that jaguars were created before man and that they were so powerful that God did not want the jaguar to watch while he was making man out of mud. The Mayas believed that their Shamans could assume the shape of jaguars and the Aztecs believed that jaguars controlled rain and lightening. Nevertheless, this species of wildcat is declining seriously because of human impact.

The jaguars range once extended from the Southwestern United States south to Argentina; however less than 50% of suitable habitat remains for these great cats today. Belize, however, has documented one of the highest densities of jaguars anywhere within their geographical range (Rabinowitz 1991) and may well be one of the last remaining strong holds for jaguars north of the Amazon basin rainforest. This is due, in part, to the large amount of relatively intact forest cover remaining in the country and that about 43% of Belize's land surface is under some legal protection status. Belize boasts the only protected area in the world specifically set aside for the preservation of the jaguar, Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (CBWS), which encompasses 128,000 acres of tropical forest. Cockscomb also connects with other protected lands, forming a forest corridor, which is essential for the maintenance of these roaming predators in the face of Latin America's high deforestation rates.

Fragmentation of forest habitat isolates jaguar populations so that they are more vulnerable to predation by man. While commercial exploitation of their skin is not a serious factor, jaguars still face local persecution by livestock owners, as well as by other people who are not cognizant of the important role that jaguars play in the local ecology. As people venture further into the forests of Belize altering these landscapes, they begin to compete with jaguars for both prey and space. For instance, in some areas cattle and sheep are ranches on what is essentially prime jaguar habitat. Thus, because they are viewed as a serious threat to livestock, Jaguars are frequently shot on sight, in spite of the country's protective legislation.

In Belize the jaguar is an "important tourism product" of the ever-growing nature-based tourism. People from all over the world, and from Belize, visit Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary in hopes of viewing a jaguar. Due to the animal's elusive behavior, seeing a jaguar often does not occur. However, a journey to the Belize Zoo guarantees a close up and exciting view of a jaguar. With over 40,000 people visiting the zoo annually, and more than 17,000 school children being exposed to conservation education

programs, the important potential to educate these visitors and students about jaguar ecology and natural history and the “problem jaguar” issue cannot be understated. Increasing awareness about these issues could increase the chances for conserving the species for future generations.

This study aims to instill an appreciation and understanding about the jaguar and the many threats they are facing as well as the importance of conserving this species. It also highlights the “problem jaguar” issue in Belize and what can be done to better manage livestock and domestic animals so as to reduce prey/predation conflicts through onsite education at the Belize Zoo and a complimentary environmental education outreach program. Using multimedia presentations and the distribution of brochures, posters and bumper stickers, this project aims to inspire a greater awareness about the jaguar and its protection.

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