

BOSTON GLOBE

Fate of the jaguar in US agency's hands

By Tony Povilitis | April 6, 2009

IN MY lifetime about a dozen wild jaguars have been killed in the United States. And few Americans heard about any of them - at least until now.

In February, a wonderfully wild jaguar walked into a snare trap set by Arizona biologists and died shortly after his release. Now a US District Court judge in Tucson has ordered the US Fish and Wildlife Service to reconsider its Bush-era decision to ignore jaguars by not preparing a recovery plan for this clearly endangered species.

Before his capture, conservationists knew about "Macho B" from snapshots taken by remote trail cameras over the years. And no, he was not named by the Village People but by researchers who identified him as one of two male Arizona jaguars of possible Mexican origin. These pictures told of a savvy old-timer who roamed the countryside, leaving us in awe with his huge paws and wondering if he had a mate. He was the first jaguar caught alive in the United States and, at 15 or more years, the oldest wild jaguar ever reported anywhere.

Upon capture, Macho B was sedated and fitted with a radio-collar to track him by satellite. But 12 days later, now listless and rapidly losing weight, he was darted by aircraft and euthanized. His kidneys were failing, apparently from the trauma of his first capture.

The fate of the jaguar in this country is now in the hands of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, the nation's point person for safeguarding our natural treasures. While recovery plans are standard for animals on the US list of endangered species, Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service unsuccessfully argued in court that it need not restore the jaguar since most of the species occurs outside of the United States.

But many endangered species in this same situation either have recovery plans or are being considered for one. For example, the northern Aplomado falcon, a bird mainly of Mexico and Central America, has long had an active recovery program with reintroductions to habitats here in the United States.

Secretary Salazar should uphold the spirit of our Endangered Species Act, avoid further court action, and have the Fish and Wildlife Service undertake a jaguar conservation program. This could be an innovative, shared effort with Mexico, as jaguars here and in nearby Sonora state belong to the same imperiled population.

Was Macho B to be the last American jaguar of a breed that once roamed our southern tier of states, as far north as Monterey Bay, the Grand Canyon, central Texas, and the southern Great Plains? Decimated by predator eradication campaigns and trophy hunting, today jaguars stand on the razor's edge of extinction.

Macho B's long and daring life will inspire many of us for years to come, as did Elsa the African lioness of Joy Adamson's "Born Free" nearly a generation ago. We would do well to save the North American jaguar - there is no recovery from extinction.

Tony Povilitis directs Life Net Nature, a nonprofit organization promoting endangered species conservation. ■

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