

Panama and Panthera establish historic jaguar protection agreement

June 28 2013



This is a jaguar walking. Credit: Nick Garbutt

A significant victory was achieved for the future of jaguars this week with the establishment of an historic conservation agreement by the government of Panama and Panthera, a global big cat conservation organization.

Gathering in Panama City at the prominent Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), the Office of Panama's National Environmental Authority (ANAM) General Administrator, Mr. Silvano Vergara, presided over the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding

(MOU) between Panthera, the National Environmental Authority, and the Mastozoological Society of Panama (SOMASPA). Through this agreement, Panthera and the government of Panama pledged to collaboratively implement conservation initiatives on behalf of the country's jaguars and their habitats within Panama's Protected Areas System, strategically balance economic development and jaguar [habitat preservation](#) throughout Panama, mitigate rancher-jaguar conflict, and initiate jaguar conservation education for the people of Panama.

As Panthera's fifth jaguar conservation agreement with a Latin American government, and two more agreements under review with the governments of Belize and Brazil, this MOU represents a giant step forward for the conservation of the jaguar.

Upon signing the agreement today, Panthera's CEO and renowned jaguar scientist, Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, stated, "The significance, location and timing of the Panama-Panthera conservation agreement for the jaguar are truly historic. Panama represents the birth place of the Jaguar Corridor Initiative, and after just seven years, we have come full circle in establishing the partnerships and projects required to successfully conserve the jaguar and its habitats long into the future."

Rabinowitz continued, "We're seeing jaguars move through human landscapes - ranches, plantations, even swimming the Panama Canal. The ability for these animals to safely get through is what is ensuring genetic connectivity across their range. The corridor is not just a theoretical model, it's alive and functional, and a pathway for the jaguar's long-term survival."

In 2006, Dr. Rabinowitz joined environmental ministers from Central America at the Second Mesoamerica Protected Area Congress meeting to reach consensus on the benefits of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor for the connectivity and conservation of the jaguar in the

region. Held in Panama City, this meeting helped launch what is now the largest carnivore conservation program in existence, spanning nearly six million square kilometers: Panthera's Jaguar Corridor Initiative (JCI).

Initiated in 2008, the JCI seeks to 'connect and protect' jaguar populations ranging from Mexico to Argentina within human landscapes to ensure the genetic diversity and survival of the species. Panama's role within this Corridor cannot be overemphasized. As one of 18 Latin American countries that harbor wild jaguars, Panama is also one of 13 countries in which Panthera is conducting jaguar conservation science. Home to a treasure chest of biodiversity, including significant jaguar populations, the narrow isthmus of Panama that snakes between Costa Rica and Colombia serves as the only bridge connecting jaguar populations between Central and South America.

Since 2008, Panthera has worked in partnership with ANAM and SOMASPA to monitor jaguar and prey populations in Panama's protected areas, assess human-jaguar conflict across the country, evaluate the vitality of jaguar habitat via aerial surveys, and train field staff to implement population monitoring studies, conflict mitigation techniques and conservation education workshops.

A majority of these efforts have been carried out in jaguar habitat lying within Panama's Indigenous 'comarcas' or autonomous territories. Due to the country's slim figure, measuring as short as 80 km between its coasts, collaboration with these native communities is necessary to maintain connectivity between jaguar populations. Recently, after months of outreach, Panthera received permission from the Ngobe Bugle community to conduct research in a significant Jaguar Corridor within their territory.

In LightHawk flights taken earlier this year with ANAM General Administrator Silvano Vergara and others, Panthera's team also

confirmed that the Kuna Yala and Madugandi indigenous territories in the northeastern stretch of the country, and the neighboring Corridor between Soberania and Alto Chagres National Parks, maintain relatively healthy jaguar habitat.

Now, with the establishment of the nation's first jaguar conservation strategy, Panthera will collaborate with the Panamanian government to strategically shape the development of land in and around the Jaguar Corridor, including the Panama Canal, to ensure a positive balance of economic development and jaguar habitat preservation. As one of the world's most remarkable engineering achievements, the Panama Canal zone continues to experience rapid human development. Today, this represents one of the key threats facing Panama's jaguars, and if unaddressed, could constitute a grave barrier to jaguars at a continental scale.

Panthera's Executive Director of Jaguar Programs, Dr. Howard Quigley, explained, "Through our conservation efforts in Panama, Panthera and our partners have uncovered a fascinating phenomenon – jaguars swimming hundreds of meters of the trans-ocean Panama Canal to continue their gene line. While this demonstrates the incredible resilience of the species, we must act now to preserve the jaguar's habitat and ensure this passageway does not soon become the species' only route of survival. We know we can have jaguars, canals and cattle ranching side-by-side if we plan in a way that makes it possible."

Along with implementing new rancher outreach and conflict mitigation projects, Panthera's scientists will continue to work with our regional partners to complete 'ground-truthing' Panama's habitats in 2013, identifying the presence and distribution of the country's jaguars and the safest passageways for the species to move in Panama and between Central and South America. Having surveyed all other jaguar range within Mesoamerica, Panama and Guatemala represent the last

remaining corridors for Panthera's scientists to verify.

ANAM General Secretary, Geremías Aguilar, who represented ANAM's General Administrator at the ceremony, additionally highlighted the role Panama takes on in its efforts to preserve biodiversity and the jaguar in the region, stating, "It is a mammal of the utmost importance to the health of the environment. The loss of biodiversity due to unsustainable human developments is one of the most significant global environmental threats in recent times. This agreement intends to improve the survival condition of the [jaguar](#), a species who represents the good health of Panamanian habitats."

Provided by Panthera

Citation: Panama and Panthera establish historic jaguar protection agreement (2013, June 28) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-panama-panthera-historic-jaguar-agreement.html>

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