

Peccaries of Mesoamerica now highly threatened, warn experts

October 5 2016, by John Delaney



Credit: Wildlife Conservation Society

Hunting, deforestation, and cattle ranching in Mesoamerica have become a triad of trouble for the white-lipped peccary (*Tayassu pecari*), an ecologically important species now threatened with regional extinction, according to WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society) and a group of experts at a recently held meeting in Belize.

WCS recently hosted a symposium at the 20th Mesoamerican Society for Conservation Biology Congress, which brought together leading scientists for an emergency assessment of the rapidly declining white-lipped peccary in Mesoamerica. The objectives of the Symposium were

to document the current status of this pig-like species, to map recent reductions in its range across Mesoamerica, and to propose conservation actions to protect the species.

Hunting and deforestation for agriculture and cattle ranching have driven precipitous declines of the white-lipped peccary in most Mesoamerican countries. As the only large mammal that moves in large herds in forested environments, this species represents one of Central America's true wildlife spectacles, and plays a key role in ecosystem function of the region's forests. Peccary herds can number up to 200 individuals and range as widely as 120 square kilometers (more than 46 square miles).

However, herd sizes like this are becoming ever rarer as hunting depletes populations and disrupts their social structure. In Mexico and Guatemala, the species' distribution range has been reduced by more than 84 percent in the last 30 years. In Honduras and Nicaragua, only a few remnant populations remain. In El Salvador, the species is already locally extinct.

Dr. Omar Figueroa, the Belizean Minister of Environment, presided over the symposium, which brought together leading mammal researchers from Belize, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. The group outlined the threats facing white-lipped peccary populations in each country. Collectively, the scientists mapped the current known locations of remaining white-lipped peccary populations and compared these with the past extent of their range to develop an idea of the rate of loss.

Experts led by Dr. Rafael Reyna-Hurtado of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) are calling for an increase in the official International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) extinction threat level from 'Vulnerable' to 'Endangered' in Mesoamerica. A map of the species' current range will be released in the coming weeks. The group of scientists and conservationists also signed a pledge committing

themselves to jointly propose and implement conservation actions to save the species.

"The white-lipped peccary is an important ecosystem engineer for the extremely threatened forests of Mesoamerica," said Dr. Jeremy Radachowsky, Director of WCS's Mesoamerica and the Western Caribbean Program. "A coordinated regional plan is required to prevent this keystone species from disappearing from the region."

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is deeply concerned about the plight of white-lipped peccaries in Central America," said Ani Cuevas, Program Officer for the Central America program. "We are pleased to support this group of scientists in assessing the range and population status of this bellwether species for healthy forests. Collaboration from a variety of partners will be critical to achieving effective conservation of this important species."

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

Citation: Peccaries of Mesoamerica now highly threatened, warn experts (2016, October 5) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-10-peccaries-mesoamerica-highly-threatened-experts.html>

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