

Battle on to save Brazil's tropical wetlands from flames

September 13 2020, by Débora Alvares



A jaguar crouches on an area recently scorched by wildfires at the Encontro das Aguas park in the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020. Firefighters, troops and volunteers have been scrambling to find and rescue jaguars and other animals before they are overtaken by the flames, which have been exacerbated by the worst drought in 47 years, strong winds and temperatures exceeding 40 degrees centigrade (104 fahrenheit). (AP Photo/Andre Penner)

A vast swath of a vital wetlands is burning in Brazil, sweeping across several national parks and obscuring the sun behind dense smoke.

Preliminary figures from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, based on [satellite images](#), indicate that nearly 5,800 square miles (1.5 million hectares) have burned in the Pantanal region since the start of August—an expanse comparable to the area consumed by the historic blazes now afflicting California. It's also well beyond the previous fire season record from 2005.

Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, whose satellites monitor the fires, said the number of Panantal fires in the first 12 days of September was nearly triple the figure for the same period last year. From January through August, the number of fires more than tripled, topping 10,000.

Fernando Tortato, who has been working and living near the Encontro Das Aguas reserve since 2008, said he's never seen the fires as bad as this year.

"It is an immense area that has been burned and consumed by the [fire](#). And we still have another two, three or four weeks without rain" ahead, he said.

Firefighters, troops and volunteers have been scrambling to find and rescue jaguars and other animals before they are overtaken by the flames, which have been exacerbated by the worst drought in 47 years, [strong winds](#) and temperatures exceeding 40 degrees centigrade (104 fahrenheit).



Men fish in the Cuiaba river amid smoke from fires at the Encontro das Aguas park at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020. A vast swath of a vital wetlands is burning in Brazil, sweeping across several national parks and obscuring the sun behind dense smoke. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)

While [illegal logging](#), mining and farming operations have been blamed for most of the fires in the Amazon region to the north, a spokesman for Mato Grosso state's firefighters, Lt. Col. Sheila Sebalhos, said one of the causes of this year's Pantanal fires is the practice of burning roots to smoke wild bees from their hives to extract honey.

The Pantanal holds thousands of plant and [animal species](#), including 159 mammals, and it abounds with jaguars, according to the World Wildlife Fund. During the [rainy season](#), rivers overflow their banks flood the land, making most of it accessible only by boat and plane. In the dry

season, wildlife enthusiasts flock to see the normally furtive jaguars lounging on riverbanks, along with macaws, caimans and capybaras.

About 200 jaguars in the area already have been injured, killed or forced from their territories by the fires, according to Panthera, an international wild cat conservation organization.



A jaguar turns away from an area recently scorched by wildfires at the Encontro das Aguas park in the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020. Firefighters, troops and volunteers have been scrambling to find and rescue jaguars and other animals before they are overtaken by the flames, which have been exacerbated by the worst drought in 47 years, strong winds and temperatures exceeding 40 degrees centigrade (104 fahrenheit). (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



An otter eats a fish at the Encontro das Aguas park at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the part as the number of fires at the world's biggest tropical wetlands has more than doubled in the first half of 2020, according to data released by a state institute. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



An recently burned area at the Encontro das Aguas park at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the state park, an eco-tourism destination known for its population of jaguars. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



An alligator remains idling at the Encontro das Aguas park at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the part as the number of fires at the world's biggest tropical wetlands has more than doubled in the first half of 2020, according to data released by a state institute. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



An recently burned area at the Encontro das Aguas park at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the park as the number of fires at the world's biggest tropical wetlands has more than doubled in the first half of 2020, according to data released by a state institute. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



A boat travels at the Encontro das Aguas park as fire consumes an area at the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the state park, an eco-tourism destination known for its population of jaguars. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



A jaguar limps along the banks of the Piqueri river in the Encontro das Aguas Park near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the state park, an eco-tourism destination known for its population of jaguars. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



Vultures stand next to the carcass of a alligator on the banks of the Cuiaba river at the Encontro das Aguas Park in the Pantanal wetlands near Pocone, Mato Grosso state, Brazil, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Wildfire has infiltrated the state park, an eco-tourism destination that is home to thousands of plant and animal species. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)

Firefighters and the Mato Grosso environment ministry have created a center for rescued animals.

"We feel a little discouraged, but we try to have hope to rescue the few animals we can," said veterinarian Karen Ribeiro, 26, who was treating an injured bird on Friday.

The same day, Brazil's navy used a helicopter to rescue a burned [jaguar](#) cub and take it to a veterinary hospital.

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