

In Colombia, cattle farmer declares truce with jaguar

May 13 2021, by Juan Sebastian Serrano



Rancher Jorge Barragan wants to protect jaguars and says he does not mind sacrificing a few head of cattle to do so

On the plains of eastern Colombia, an age-old conflict between man and beast plays out near-daily. Jaguars attack cattle. Farmers retaliate with shotguns.

But rancher Jorge Barragan has declared a unilateral truce with the carnivorous cats.

He has taken a liking to the largest feline of the Americas, and says he does not mind sacrificing a few head of cattle to do his part to conserve the deadly hunters that have captured his imagination.

About ten years ago, Barragan decided to sacrifice part of his family farm, La Aurora, to the savanna that provides shelter and food for jaguars he says are "worth more alive than dead."

The family has long banned hunting of wild animals—jaguar food—on the property.

Now 61, Barragan seeks the cats out rather than dreading a sighting.

He spends a large part of his day combing through footage on hidden cameras dotted across the farm, which has also become a nature reserve, in Colombia's eastern Casanare department.

In the pictures, he encounters old feline friends and discovers new ones.

But it is not always a happy coexistence.

Doing the opposite

The cats, which can weigh 100 kilograms (220 pounds) and measure some two meters (six feet) in length, frequently cross Barragan's property.



A jaguar track at La Aurora farm

And sometimes the cattle fall victim—as many as 100 per year at a loss of some \$300 per head.

Barragan says he makes up the losses, at least partly, through visits by scientists and tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the majestic spotted cats.

In 2018, the farm drew some 160 visitors per month, at \$30 per person per night, but this revenue stream has all but run dry during the coronavirus pandemic.

The jaguar is listed as "near threatened" by the International Union for

Conservation of Nature.

Population numbers are decreasing, with farming, residential and commercial development among the main threats.

"Jaguar-livestock conflict is a serious threat to jaguar survival," states the IUCN. "There are few areas within Jaguar range that can be considered safe" for the cats.

For Barragan, "a culture was created of killing the feline to stop the problem" of livestock losses.

"But we are doing the opposite," he told AFP, proudly.

The rancher said he inherited a deep respect for Nature from his father.



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But his love affair with the jaguar began when he saw a photo of one of the majestic predators in 2009, taken on a hidden camera a student had left on the farm.

"We knew that we had (jaguars) in the savanna, but I was very moved when I saw that first photo."

Range has halved

Twelve years later, Barragan has given names to many of the animals that visit the farm, each sporting their own unique coat pattern.

"He has managed to identify 54 individual jaguars," said Samantha Rincon, of the Panthera foundation dedicated to feline conservation.

According to Panthera, about 55 other Colombian farms are now following in La Aurora's footsteps, seeking to better coexist with the jaguars they used to regard as the enemy.

Measures include introducing more spirited steers to defend the rest of the herd in the event of an attack, halting deforestation and putting a stop to hunting jaguar prey such as capybaras.

"By taking away the jaguar's habitat, by eliminating its prey, obviously it will go in search of domestic animals" for food, Rincon told AFP.

Outside the confines of La Aurora, the picture is very different, with

vast plantations of rice and oil palm competing with jaguars for territory.

The jaguar

Main threats

- Loss of habitat
- Illegal trade
- Human hunters

Near threatened



Robust head

The spots allow it to camouflage in its jungle habitat

Powerful bite

Largest feline in the Americas, 3rd in the world

Weight:
56 to 96 kg

Panthera onca



Source: IUCN

AFP Photo/Douglas Trent

The jaguar, a "near threatened" species according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

Panthera says there are some 15,000 of the cats left in Colombia, and about 170,000 in the Americas as a whole.

The species once stretched from the southern United States to northern Argentina, but its range has since been halved, and it is extinct in several countries.

Climate change is taking its toll, too.

In 2016, a strong drought killed off large numbers of capybara, giant rodents that form a large part of the jaguar diet.

Barragan said he would love to see more farmers commit to protecting the felines.

"Finding a cat on a cattle farm always produces a certain fear... but our experience shows that we can coexist with the jaguar," he said.

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