

Connecting the spots: First comprehensive review of national jaguar protection laws

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Conservationists have conducted the first comprehensive review of national laws across the range of the jaguar (*Panthera onca*) to show opportunities for strengthening legal protections of the largest cat species found in the Americas. Credit: Julie Larsen Maher/WCS

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national laws across the range of the jaguar (*Panthera onca*) to show opportunities for strengthening legal protections of the largest cat species found in the Americas.

The review, published in the *International Journal of Wildlife Law and Policy* was conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Cornell University, Universidad del Pacífico in Lima, and Zamorano University in Honduras. The authors say it presents a simplified way to compare protection approaches by [jaguar](#) range states that, together, could constitute a robust conservation framework.

The review comes at a time when concerns about escalating, illegal trade in jaguar parts—especially their skins, teeth and claws—has increased the need to understand the strengths and shortcomings of the legal frameworks that protect the species. The authors note that no range country permits trade in dead jaguars and all countries in the review have passed some administrative and criminal sanctions for [illegal hunting](#) and trading of their parts; however, the penalties range widely and there is a need for more effective implementation of legal consequences.

The authors list the following opportunities for improvements in the legal structure:

- Adopting national legal-level laws that specifically call for jaguar protection
- Establishing clear administrative and criminal penalties for the hunting and trafficking of jaguars and refusal to comply with [best practices](#) for coexistence
- Ensuring that the penalties enacted for offenses provide sufficient deterrents for national and foreign actors
- Recognizing non-binding conservation strategies, such as wildlife management plans, within the legal system. This should include

systems that prevent and manage human-wildlife conflicts, and recognition of traditional customary management practices that provide incentives for the sustainable use of natural resources across vast geographic areas.

The paper's lead author Dr. Heidi Kretser, WCS Conservation Social Scientist says that "individuals and institutions working on jaguar conservation can use the information in this review to ensure that national legal frameworks and administrative and criminal penalties for violations are potent. Government and territorial institutions can benefit from the analysis, but also have a responsibility to ensure adequate enforcement capacity to implement the laws. We believe this presentation will help range countries realize the 2030 goals for conservation of jaguar across the Americas."

The authors found a need to harmonize laws and penalties within and across bordering countries: adapting regional efforts to the large movements of jaguars, which are found over a 7 million square kilometers (over 2.7 million square miles) range that extends from the southern United States to the north of Argentina.

The majority of the subpopulations of jaguars are transboundary (e.g., Brazil/Argentina, Guatemala/Belize/Mexico). For example, the border area shared by Ecuador, Peru and Colombia has been cataloged as a single, massive Jaguar Conservation Unit. Jaguar Conservation Units are defined as areas with stable prey that could maintain a minimum resident jaguar population of 50 breeding individuals, and adequate habitat. This area is important to ensure jaguar connectivity in the Amazon Basin, and to conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services fundamental to Indigenous peoples. Yet, these countries have decidedly different laws; Peru has adopted aggravated penalties for illegal killings performed inside protected areas whereas the other countries have not.

The paper focused on legal frameworks applicable to wildlife conservation and jaguars specifically, but other legal arrangements that negatively affect jaguar conservation exist such as deficient land titling rules, loopholes allowing for deforestation, and weak enforcement capacity.

Monica Nuñez Salas, Peruvian Law Professor and co-author on the paper, noted that "the social and environmental context in which these laws are enacted profoundly influence their effectiveness for conservation."

Said John Polisar of the Zamorano Biodiversity Center and formerly with WCS says that "it is our hope that this review will help jaguar [conservation](#) in individual range countries, in transboundary areas, and range-wide."

Future work is still needed to improve enforcement and implementation in the field and to close loopholes in existing legislation. In some cases, there may be a need to update laws to integrate current understanding of the [illegal trade](#) in jaguar parts happening in the region and online; and to improve knowledge about how to manage human-jaguar conflict, especially in ranching areas.

More information: Heidi E. Kretser et al, A Range-Wide Analysis of Legal Instruments Applicable to Jaguar Conservation, *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/13880292.2022.2077406](https://doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2022.2077406)

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