Investigations of online trade in jaguar parts show threat is widespread

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Jaguar fangs for sale online. Credit: Damian Rumiz / Museo Noel Kempff Mercado

Researchers with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) published

the results of an international investigation finding that the online trade of jaguar parts is openly detectable on multiple online platforms, representing an emerging and serious threat to jaguar populations across the range of this Latin American wildlife icon.

The results have been published in *PLOS One* as well as being summarized in a brief publication available in Chinese, English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

The study involved 23 WCS researchers working across seven different languages (Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch, French, Chinese, and Vietnamese) looking at 31 online platforms—including online marketplaces, video-sharing and social media sites and weblogs—using standardized search terms and methodologies.

The results revealed that between 2009 and 2019, trade in jaguar parts was openly detectable and particularly concentrated on jaguar fangs. A total of 230 posts were detected with possible jaguar parts for sale across over a dozen categories of body parts. A conservative screening of images found that, at minimum, 71 posts contained images of different jaguar parts on 12 different platforms in four languages (50.7 percent posts in Spanish, 25.4 percent Portuguese, 22.5 percent Chinese and 1.4 percent French), including a total of 125 jaguar parts.

Teeth were by far the most detected body part, with 156 posts offering at least 367 teeth, 95 of which were accompanied by images visually verified by experts as jaguar teeth, and Mexico (19), China (18), Bolivia (12), and Brazil (9) were the leading countries offering visually verified jaguar teeth for sale. Jaguar skins were the second most traded parts and included posts assessed to be linked to South America.

The overall range of the jaguar (Panthera onca) has shrunk by almost 50 percent over the last century. However, a combination of protected area

commitments by the governments of Latin America, along with the 1975 prohibition of trade in spotted cats by CITES, has helped lead to the recovery of some strategically significant stronghold populations across the otherwise declining range of this species.

Over the last decade, however, concerns have risen that renewed levels (or previously poorly detected levels) of illegal domestic and international trade in jaguar parts could derail the progress made in these strongholds.

This research presents a snapshot of online jaguar trade and methods that may have utility for many species now traded online. The study took place within a longer-term project to assist law enforcement in host countries to better identify potential illegal trade online, with research findings informing hubs in Latin America for building such capacity.

The lead author of the study, Dr. John Polisar, said, "Our team is pleased to share this study in the hope that it will strengthen efforts to disrupt the currently widespread illegal trade in jaguar parts. The standardized methodology that we developed has already been productively applied to document visible online trade and combat wildlife trafficking across multiple diverse taxa in the region."

In addition, the report provides another tool that management authorities in every jaguar range country can apply to combat illegal wildlife trade, and that these methods and results complement international jaguar conservation cooperation efforts such as the 2030 Jaguar Road Map initiative and CITES in unified multi-national efforts to effectively advance jaguar conservation.

WCS holds ground for jaguars in a set of globally significant strategically located large jaguar conservation landscapes that contribute to jaguar conservation range wide.

Dr. Rob Wallace, Senior Conservation Scientist at WCS and one of the co-authors of the study, remarked, "WCS remains committed to landscape-scale conservation, which is fundamental for naturally scarce and wide-ranging apex predators such as the jaguar. While on-the-ground conservation efforts with a plethora and diverse array of legitimate local actors in these global strongholds remains our core approach, WCS is proud to provide additional technical assistance to the governments of the region in the enormous and dynamic challenge of addressing the illegal trade in extremely vulnerable species in the region, including, and especially, the jaguar."

More information: John Polisar et al, Multi-lingual multi-platform investigations of online trade in jaguar parts, *PLOS ONE* (2023). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0280039

Presentation: Summary of multi-lingual multi-platform investigations of online trade in jaguar parts

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