

Big cats, wild pigs and short-eared dogs -- oh, my!

27 January 2009



A jaguar recently captured in a camera trap in Ecuador.
Credit: Santiago Espinosa

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) released photos today from the first large-scale census of jaguars in the Amazon region of Ecuador—one of the most biologically rich regions on the planet.

The ongoing census, which began in 2007, is working to establish baseline population numbers as oil exploration and subsequent development puts growing pressure on wildlife in Ecuador's Yasuni National Park and adjacent Waorani Ethnic Reserve. Together, these two protected areas make up some 6,500 square miles (16,800 square kilometers) of wilderness.

The research is being carried out by a team led by WCS research fellow Santiago Espinosa. Espinosa's team, which includes several members of the Waorani indigenous group, set up a complex system of "camera traps," that photograph animals remotely when they trip a sensor that detects body heat. His work is being funded by WCS, WWF, and the University of Florida.

So far the team has taken 75 pictures of jaguars, which can be individually identified through their

unique pattern of spots. Other images show jaguar prey species, such as white-lipped peccaries, and other rarely seen species, including two pictures of a short-eared dog, a relative of foxes and wolves.

"The main threats to jaguars in Ecuador are habitat degradation and loss due to various human activities," said Espinosa. "Bushmeat hunting by local communities has increased due to road development that provides access to otherwise isolated areas. Additionally, people hunt bushmeat to sell commercially in local markets, rather than simply for their own consumption. There is competition for food as people hunt the same prey species as the jaguar. If the prey species disappear, the jaguar will be gone."

Espinosa's preliminary data show far fewer jaguars in more hunted areas compared to remote study sites. In his first survey at a heavily hunted site within Yasuni National Park, Espinosa identified only three individual jaguars. At his second study site in a rarely hunted and remote area, he distinguished 14 different jaguars—almost five times as many as near the populated site.

Espinosa and WCS plan to extend the jaguar camera trap surveys to other areas of Ecuador, working with local communities in both the Amazon region and along the coast where most of the forests are gone but still may provide refuge to jaguars.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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