

Jaguars Don't Live Here Anymore

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EARLIER this month, the [United States Fish and Wildlife Service announced](#) it would designate “critical habitat” for the endangered jaguar in the United States and take the first steps toward mandating a jaguar recovery plan. This is a policy reversal and, on the surface, it may appear to be a victory for the conservation community and for jaguars, the largest wild cats in the Western Hemisphere.

But as someone who has studied jaguars for nearly three decades, I can tell you it is nothing less than a slap in the face to good science. What's more, by changing the rules for animal preservation, it stands to weaken the Endangered Species Act.

The debate on what to do about jaguars started in 1997, when, at the urging of many biologists (including me), the Fish and Wildlife Service put the jaguar on the United States endangered species list, because there had been occasional sightings of the cats crossing north over the United States-Mexico border. At the same time, however, the agency ruled that it would not be “prudent” to declare that the jaguar has critical habitat — a geographic area containing features the species needs to survive — in the United States. Determining an endangered species' critical habitat is a first step toward developing a plan for helping that species recover.

The 1997 decision not to determine critical habitat for the jaguar was the right one, because even though they cross the border from time to time, jaguars don't occupy any territory in our country — and that probably means the environment here is no longer ideal for them. In prehistoric times, these beautiful cats inhabited significant areas of the western United States, but in the past 100 years, there have been few, if any, resident breeding populations here. The last time a female jaguar with a cub was sighted in this country was in the early 1900s. (Jaguars — the world's third-largest wild cats, weighing up to 250 pounds, with distinctive black rosettes on their fur — are a separate species from the smaller, tawny mountain lions, which still roam large areas of the American West.)

Two well-intentioned conservation advocacy groups, the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife, sued the Fish and Wildlife Service to change its ruling. Thus in 2006, the agency reassessed the situation and [again determined](#) that no areas in the United States met the definition of critical habitat for the jaguar. Despite occasional sightings, mostly within 40 miles of the Mexican border, there were still no data to indicate jaguars had taken up residence inside the United States.

After this second ruling was made, an Arizona rancher, with support from the state Game and Fish Department, set infrared-camera traps to gather more data, and essentially confirmed the

Fish and Wildlife Service's findings. The cameras did capture transient jaguars, including one male jaguar, nicknamed Macho B, who roamed the Arizona borderlands for more than a decade. But Macho B, now dead, might have been the sole resident American jaguar, and his extensive travels indicated he was not having an easy time surviving in this dry, rugged region. Despite the continued evidence, the two conservation advocacy groups continued to sue the government. Apparently, they want jaguars to repopulate the United States even if jaguars don't want to. Last March, a federal district judge in Arizona ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to revisit its 2006 determination on critical habitat.

The facts haven't changed: there is still no area in the United States essential to the conservation of the jaguar. But, having asserted this twice already, the service, now under a new president, has bent to the tiresome litigation. On Jan. 12, Fish and Wildlife officials claimed to have evaluated new scientific information that had become available after the July 2006 ruling. Lo and behold, they determined that it is now prudent to designate critical habitat for the jaguar in the United States.

This means that Fish and Wildlife must now also formulate a recovery plan for the jaguar. And since jaguars have not been able to reestablish themselves naturally over the past century, the government will likely have to go to significant expense to attempt to bring them back — especially if the cats have to be reintroduced.

So why not do everything we can, at whatever cost, to bring jaguars back into the United States? To begin with, the American Southwest is, at best, marginal habitat for the animals. More important, there are better ways to help jaguars. South of our border, from Mexico to Argentina, thousands of jaguars live and breed in their true critical habitat. Governments and conservation groups (including the one I head) are already working hard to conserve jaguar populations and connect them to one another through an initiative called the Jaguar Corridor.

The jaguars that now and then cross into the United States most likely come from the northernmost population of jaguars, in Sonora, Mexico. Rather than demand jaguars return to our country, we should help Mexico and other jaguar-range countries conserve the animals' true habitat.

The recent move by the Fish and Wildlife Service means that the sparse federal funds devoted to protecting wild animals will be wasted on efforts that cannot help save jaguars. It also stands to weaken the Endangered Species Act, because if critical habitat is redefined as any place where a species might ever have existed, and where you or I might want it to exist again, then the door is open for many other senseless efforts to bring back long-lost creatures.

The Fish and Wildlife officials whose job it is to protect the country's wild animals need to grow a stronger backbone — stick with their original, correct decision and save their money for more useful preservation work. Otherwise, when funds are needed to preserve all those small, ugly, non-charismatic endangered species at the back of the line, there may be no money left.

Alan Rabinowitz, the president and chief executive of Panthera, a wild cat conservation group, is the author of "Jaguar: One Man's Struggle to Establish the World's First Jaguar Preserve."