
JAGUAR 98 Fact Sheet (9/1/98)

Jaguar (*Panthera onca*)

Description: The jaguar is the only member of the genus *Panthera* (big cats) to be found in the Americas where it is considered the New World equivalent of the leopard. Its coat is basically yellowish-brown but can vary from almost white to black. Its back is marked with dark rosettes and the lower part of the tail is ringed with black. Jaguars weigh anywhere from 90-120 kg (males) and 60-90 kg (females).

Range: Historically, jaguar ranged from the southern United States through Central America to Venezuela, the Guianas, and Brazil. The former United States distribution included southern California, New Mexico, southern Arizona, Texas, and possibly Louisiana and Colorado. Unfortunately, the jaguar is now extinct in Uruguay and virtually extinct in the United States, most of Mexico and Argentina, and the developed areas of Central and South America. Current distribution is in a broad belt from central Mexico through Central America and into South America as far south as the northern portion of Argentina. The last confirmed sighting of a jaguar in the United States, was on March 7, 1996 in New Mexico's Peloncillo Mountains, about 6 miles from the Mexico border.

Habitat: Jaguar habitat requirements include dense cover (forest, brush, grass) water, and sufficient prey. In general, they occur in a wide variety of tropical habitats, ranging from montane forest and wet savannah to tropical rain forest and deciduous tropical forest. They are especially common near rivers, streams and lagoons and have been known to use roads and trails for travel and hunting.

Diet: Although known to feed on large prey such as deer, tapir, and peccary, jaguars are opportunistic feeders often feeding on smaller animals, like capybara, sloths, armadillos, and fish.

Social Organization: Data suggest that jaguars are predominantly solitary. Unlike other solitary cat species; however, home ranges may occasionally overlap. It is suggested that in areas of high prey density, jaguars can share limited ranges.

Conservation Status: Despite the historical lack of precise population estimates, jaguar are known to be rare or extinct in many parts of their former range. Estimates indicate that the total current wild population is greater than 10,000; however, several subspecies are reported as rare.

The United States population consists of only isolated stray animals crossing the Mexico/U.S. border. Jaguar are listed as endangered by USDA, Appendix I by CITES and Vulnerable by IUCN.

Threats to Survival: Threats to the jaguar include habitat loss, hunting, and development throughout their range. Hunting and export are still allowed in some Central American countries and restrictions in other countries are poorly enforced; even if hunting is prohibited. Loss of forest habitat is a major concern for the decline of the species as estimates of deforestation rates in Latin America are among the highest in the world.

Zoo Programs -- SSP: The AZA Jaguar Species Survival Plan (SSP) encourages and supports conservation and education projects that promote the survival of the jaguar in nature. This will be accomplished by (1) maintaining a viable, healthy population in North America, (2) developing appropriate educational materials for use in SSP institutions and in the jaguar's countries of origin, (3) identifying and assisting worthy jaguar field projects, and (4) supporting research that will directly facilitate the above goals.

The captive population is maintained primarily as ambassadors to raise funds for field projects and to educate the public about deforestation in the range of the jaguar. Although North America zoos maintain both spotted and black (melanistic) jaguars, both are managed together in one population for breeding. There are currently 98 jaguars in 34 AZA institutions; only four of these are wild caught animals traced back to Central or South America. Continued efforts are underway by several AZA institutions to obtain wild or captive born animals from Central or South America in order to increase the genetic representation in the SSP population.

Conservation (Field Work): The SSP continues to support and encourage research directed at the conservation of the jaguar. One laboratory study receiving support is investigating gamete rescue and oocyte/sperm maturation. The SSP also is watching closely a DNA study designed to better identify how many subspecies of jaguar may exist. In the field the SSP is hoping to begin a project to establish a link between satellite-tracked jaguars in Mexico and education programs in AZA institutions. Participating institutions would provide funds for the satellite-tracked radio collar and in return they would receive daily updates on where their jaguar and the other jaguars in the study have moved. This information could be followed by zoo guests or individuals in the formal education programs in many zoos.

Education: Education of zoo patrons about the jaguar and habitat destruction is an important component of conservation efforts. Through

the SSP, educational goals will be defined both in this country and Latin and Central American countries.

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