

Jaguar's death sparks protest at Fish & Wildlife



Protester Louise Misztal, 26, holds a picture of an ocelot snapped by a remote camera in northern Sonora, Mexico. B. POOLE/Tucson Citizen

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About three dozen people lined up outside U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service offices in Tucson on Thursday to protest the capture and killing of a jaguar.

Macho B, an animal that was first photographed in southern Arizona in 1996, was captured Feb. 18 and released wearing a radio collar. He was recaptured Monday and euthanized at the Phoenix Zoo after he was found to have severe kidney failure.

His capture southwest of Tucson near the Mexico border was inadvertent. He was caught in a trap set by the state Game & Fish Department to catch and study mountain lions and bears in southern Arizona.

The protest was aimed at raising awareness about the elusive cats and the need for a recovery plan for the species, which was added to the endangered species list in 1997.

"As far as we know, Macho B was the last jaguar in the United States," said Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, which sponsored the protest.

A center lawsuit filed in 2007 aims to force the federal government to designate habitat and develop a recovery plan for the species, two things Fish & Wildlife under President Bush declined to do, Robinson said.

"If the (Obama) administration takes an honest look at the science and the law, we feel they will take a radically different approach," Robinson said.

Steve Spangle, the Arizona field supervisor for Fish & Wildlife, declined to comment on the lawsuit or plans for the jaguar. He defended the decision to collar the animal and denied stress from capture caused the fatal kidney failure.

The protocol for dealing with jaguars will be reviewed, but Spangle does not expect major changes.

"We had the best and brightest develop this protocol," he said.

This is the third time the "last" jaguar has been killed in Arizona, said Kieran Suckling, executive director for the center. Twice during the 1970s jaguars were shot in the state, he said.

"This time the last jaguar is killed in the United States, I want to make it the last time the last jaguar is killed in the United States," Suckling told the crowd of protesters, drawing applause.

Tucsonan Charlie Kimble, 40, was among the protesters because he saw a jaguar in 1999 on Interstate 10, he said.

"One ran across the highway near McCartney Road just north of Casa Grande," Kimble said.

Since then, Kimble has been a jaguar advocate, he said.

Fish & Wildlife last year declined to designate critical habitat in the United States for the animal because the main population is in Mexico and the U.S. land is not critical to the species survival.

The center lawsuit, filed in 2007, goes to trial March 23 in federal court in Tucson.

Jaguars used to range across much of the southern United states, including Appalachia, and ranged north to the San Francisco Bay Area, Robinson said.

"They were seen as far north as the Grand Canyon" in Arizona, he said.

Macho B was photographed by remote cameras numerous times in Arizona in the past decade.