

Feds: Jaguar capture was intentional, illegal

by Jeremy Duda

Published: January 23rd, 2010

A report by the U.S. Department of the Interior slammed the Arizona Game and Fish Department over the capture and killing of an endangered jaguar last year, saying the capture was intentional and illegal.

In an investigation over the capture and death of Macho B, which is believed to have been the last living jaguar in the United States, the Interior Department's inspector general found that Game and Fish employees intentionally captured the animal in violation of federal law. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Justice are investigating the incident, the report said.

The report, which was redacted before being provided to media outlets, also stated that Game and Fish ignored protocols on the trapping of other animals in jaguar habitat, and that a necropsy of the animal was improperly conducted.

"Evidence, which was developed as part of the ongoing criminal investigation by (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) Office of Law Enforcement and the United States Department of Justice, indicates that Macho B's first capture by (Arizona Game and Fish Department) was intentional," the report said.

The Game and Fish Department disputed many of the report's findings. In a press statement, the department said it did not direct any of its employees to intentionally trap a jaguar. The department also said it "disagrees with any assertion in the report that the department did not have a valid permit," and that Macho B's necropsy is not yet complete.

Macho B was captured in February 2009 while the Game and Fish Department was trapping mountain lions and black bears in the Coronado National Forest, according to the report. Department officials put a GPS tracking collar on the jaguar. Several days later, the GPS collar indicated that Macho B wasn't moving, leading the department to believe he might be in poor health.

Department officials found the animal and transported him to the Phoenix Zoo, where tests determined that he was suffering from fatal and irreversible kidney failure. As a result, Macho B was euthanized.

If the Game and Fish Department did not have a permit to trap other animals in known jaguar habitat, which could lead to the incidental capture of the endangered animal, it would be a violation of the Endangered Species Act. The inspector general's report said the Game and Fish Department did not consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service, which is required by the act.

The report also alleged that the Game and Fish Department improperly ordered a cosmetic necropsy, which preserves the animal's hide, instead of a full necropsy that could have provided extensive details about Macho B's health and physical condition. According to the report, the Fish and Wildlife Service official who authorized the cosmetic necropsy did so because he did not realize there was a difference between the two.

Michael Robinson, of the Arizona-based environmental group the Center for Biological Diversity, said the study validated its long-held beliefs about alleged misconduct by the Game and Fish Department.

"They really affirmed what we've been saying for a while ... that it looks like the jaguar was captured intentionally, rather than accidentally as the Arizona Game and Fish Department claimed. The report also states that the capture was illegal," Robinson said.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit last year in federal court against the Game and Fish Department in an attempt to prevent the department from undertaking any activities that might result in the capture or harming of an endangered jaguar. He said the center will make sure that the report becomes part of the official record in the lawsuit.