

---

# Los Angeles Times

---

MARCH 16, 2010

## Environmental group calls for protected habitat to be set aside for jaguars in the American Southwest

---

By Susan Montoya Bryan,  
Associated Press Writer

---

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - Environmentalists are asking the federal government to set aside an area of the Southwest more than half the size of California to help protect the endangered jaguar.

The area proposed as critical habitat by the Center for Biological Diversity would represent one of the largest swaths of land set aside for any single species, spanning more than 53 million acres across New Mexico, Arizona, Southern California and West Texas.

“As an animal at the top of the food chain, jaguars roam over vast distances and we need to think beyond individual animals and instead plan for managing a recovered population,” the center’s Michael Robinson said Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is evaluating what the elusive cats need to survive and areas in the Southwest where they would have the best chance. The agency has acknowledged “physical and biological features” in the region that can be used by jaguars.

The largest cats native to the Western hemisphere, jaguars live primarily in Mexico, Central and South America. They once inhabited an extensive area that spanned California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Louisiana, but there have been only rare glimpses of the animals along U.S.-Mexico border in recent years.

Jaguars were spotted in 1996 near the Arizona-New Mexico border and again



In this picture made between August and September 2004, one of two jaguars is shown after it was photographed by a remote motion-sensing cameras in the borderlands south of Tucson, Ariz. Environmentalists want the federal government to set aside more than 53 million acres in New Mexico, Arizona, California and Texas as critical habitat for the endangered jaguar. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is evaluating which areas of the Southwest will be set aside for the elusive cat, once thought to have disappeared from the United States. (AP Photo/Humboldt State University and Jaguar Conservation Team, Emil McCain)

in 2006. Most recently, a snare captured a jaguar last year in southern Arizona. That cat was eventually euthanized after falling ill, sparking criticism over jaguar recovery efforts.

The Fish and Wildlife Service decided this year to set aside critical habitat for the jaguar based on information from the last three years, but indications show that amount of land will be far less than what environmentalists want, given that the southwestern United States represents only a fraction of the jaguar’s current range.

“Just because we’ve seen a couple of jaguars doesn’t mean that’s suitable habitat for a viable population. It’s

at the edge of the species’ range, and that’s the worst place in the world to try to understand the life history characteristics of an animal,” said Paul Krausman, a biologist and professor at the University of Montana.

The other hurdle is the sheer magnitude of the group’s proposal, which includes more than 27 million acres in Arizona and another 26 million in New Mexico, or nearly 83,000 square miles.

Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association, said designating such a large swath of critical habitat would have wide-ranging implications for land managers and would serve as

“another nail in the coffin” of the region’s rural livelihoods.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said it will review the Center for Biological Diversity’s proposal along with other comments received on jaguar habitat. The agency plans to have a draft proposal ready early next year.

“We’re going to concentrate on the fact that the jaguar barely occurs in the U.S. and so the amount of habitat that is truly critical to its recovery is going to be much smaller than it would be for a widespread species such as a spotted

owl or a lynx,” said Steve Spangle, field supervisor of the agency’s ecological services office in Arizona.

Large areas of critical habitat are not unheard of. The agency has designated about 39,000 square miles in six northern states for the Canada lynx, 13,000 square miles for the Mexican spotted owl and 9,600 square miles in California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah for the desert tortoise.

A proposal is also pending to set aside more than 200,000 square miles for the polar bear, but most of that is sea ice.

Robinson said the areas outlined in the center’s proposal were chosen based on a review of several models and maps assessing potential jaguar habitat in the Southwest. The areas would provide a protected avenue for the cats to travel northward from Mexico, he said.

“This would enhance the northern jaguar population’s chance of survival and recovery by conserving habitat that could potentially support dozens if not hundreds of jaguars,” Robinson said.

*The Associated Press*