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## Finally Some Hope for America's Rare Jaguars

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Jaguars once roamed vast swaths of the American Southwest and parts of Texas and Louisiana.

But, like nearly all big predators, they had a hard time surviving the onslaught of humanity. As settlement moved west, forests were cleared and wetlands were drained and jaguars lost some of their most important habitat. Still more were killed out of fear for livestock.

The last female jaguar in the United States was shot and killed in Arizona in 1963. For a long time, it was thought they might never return.

But jaguars are persistent survivors, especially if we give them a chance.

That's why it was so important this month that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protected nearly 1,200 square miles as "critical habitat" for jaguars in New Mexico and Arizona. This step, which comes nearly 17 years after jaguars were protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, should be a pivotal point for returning jaguars to the American landscape.

By protecting some of the jaguars' most important habitat, we're opening the possibility that these cats may find their way north from Mexico either on their own or with help from people, forming a population of jaguars in the United States for the first time in decades.

They belong here and deserve a shot at survival. Jaguars, the world's third-largest cats after tigers and lions, evolved in North America before colonizing the jungle habitats of South America. Ruthless and ignorant government sponsored programs to shoot, trap and poison predators across the American landscape wiped out the last jaguars from the United States.

The government has been slow to respond to the jaguars' plight, and indeed Endangered Species Act protection and critical habitat designation wouldn't have happened without lawsuits by the Center for Biological Diversity, where I work.

But we have a chance now to reverse that legacy, to write a new chapter for jaguars that's no longer indifferent to their suffering or their absence.

Endangered species with protected critical habitat are more than twice as likely to be recovering as those without.

In the case of the jaguar there are some key areas left out of the new habitat protections - namely in the rugged headwaters of New Mexico's Gila River and along Arizona's Mogollon Rim -- but this is a good start.

Today, we know there is at least one jaguar living in the United States. He's been photographed repeatedly by motion-sensor cameras in the Santa Rita Mountains near Tucson, Ariz. (If you haven't seen these amazing photos, check them out [here](#).) Incidentally, that's the same area where the Rosemont mine -- a massive open-pit copper mine -- is being proposed.

This male, and the places where he roams, must be protected. We've taken a step toward ensuring his survival and, hopefully, ultimately building a thriving population of jaguars in the United States once more. These great cats deserve nothing less.