

Assessment of Rancher Knowledge of Jaguar Issues

By Colleen Svancara

IAA: 4500052885

We conducted nine interviews with leaders in the ranching community in southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. Interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions framed under five topics including wildlife habitat conservation, attitudes towards jaguars, concerns with jaguar critical habitat, conservation incentive programs, and how ranchers get rangeland management information.

Rancher Concerns and Common Themes

After evaluating the interview responses we compiled interviewees' shared concerns about critical habitat. From most frequent to least, these concerns include: 1) Maintaining grazing operations, 2) Restrictions on land use, 3) Increased government regulation, 4) A general opinion that the region is not jaguar habitat, 5) Concerns about unknown future impacts, 6) Limitations to hunting, 7) Depredation of livestock, and 8) Implications of ESA for border security.

Detailed summary of common themes:

- *Ranching and Wildlife Management* – All interviewees agreed that ranching benefits wildlife through fundamental range management – maintaining contiguous swathes of land and creating water. They felt the presence of jaguars in this area shows how successful ranching has been and should be commended.
- *Yes to Jaguars, No to Critical Habitat* – Many interviewees regarded jaguars with similar respect as they do all wildlife and would be thrilled if they ever saw one. All nine interviewees disagreed with the critical habitat designation. They do not believe the U.S. has suitable jaguar habitat and think conservation efforts should be focused where jaguar abundance is highest.
- *Critical Habitat Designated for Ulterior Motives* – Some interviewees believed critical habitat was designated to remove grazing, hunting, and mining from public lands, or could be used to prevent the Altar Valley pipeline from being constructed. They understood the ESA itself does not limit these activities, but fear environmental groups will file lawsuits to achieve such restrictions. Two interviewees did not think critical habitat would change much, as long as the information federal agents have told them holds true.
- *Role of Government in Ranch Management* – We heard that working with government on ranch projects is a slow, demanding process and collaboration is often more punitive for stewards than rewarding. While most agreed that government must have a role, fear of more regulations on grazing, land improvement projects, etc. increased their trepidation about working with government programs.
- *Incentive Programs* – Interviewees' willingness to participate in conservation incentive programs depended on scale of the project and benefits outweighing the costs. Interviewees concerns would be mitigated somewhat if government partnerships could bring in additional resources and funding to accomplish larger projects with real legal protections. Many had positive experiences working with NRCS (unsure if this was due to people or projects themselves). Agency personnel and reputation could be a determinant of participation in programs.
- *Information Resources* - Most interviewees are part of a collaborative ranching group. They attend meetings and receive newsletters and listserv emails. Some read the Federal Register and draft comments, or read research articles. Most rely heavily on science and often call upon experts to deliver facts or perform localized studies. Some interviewees questioned

jaguar critical habitat because Alan Rabinowitz, a big cat expert, previously stated that the area is unsuitable for jaguars.

We sought to understand interviewees' attitudes of wildlife, jaguars, and their concerns with jaguar critical habitat. We found they have a strong land stewardship ethic and work to conserve natural ecosystems and resources. They do not mind that the jaguar wanders into the U.S., but do mind the Federal government's action to protect land for such a rare species.

A peer-reviewed publication based on these interviews is currently under development.