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A Mega-Canal In Nicaragua Could Kill Off Jaguars and Indigenous Groups

*By Eva Hershaw (/contributor/eva-hershaw)*

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It's a new take on an old question: How do you get a jaguar to cross a canal?

For wildlife biologists working in Nicaragua, at least one of the answers is simple: you first lead it to water. But if authorities don't take measures to ensure the existence of land-to-water wildlife corridors in the construction of the \$50 billion mega-canal slated to cut through Nicaragua, they will risk the loss of one of the country's most emblematic and endangered species.

With major construction scheduled to begin at the end of the year, wildlife biologists are calling the project hasty, secretive, and potentially disastrous for the region's flora and fauna. New data gathered by Global Wildlife Conservation and Panthera, in collaboration with Michigan State University, shows (<http://talkinpets.com/new/latest-items/item/2379-new-report-renews-concern-of-nicaraguan-canal-s-potential-impact-on-jaguars-and-other-rare-wildlife.html>) that two major genetic pathways for jaguars and other large mammals from Central America will be cut in two by the Nicaraguan Interoceanic Canal.

"Fragmentation is the nemesis of biodiversity," Howard Quigley, Jaguar Program Executive Director for Panthera, said. "Whenever you fragment or isolate a population, you make that population smaller and cut off gene flow." That gene flow, he explained, is what offers ecosystems resilience and guarantees that a species has enough individuals to survive in the long term. "Any time you sever that connectivity within a system, you put a nail in the coffin of those species," Quigley added.

Conservation groups have found natural allies in the indigenous communities whose land falls within the concession.

The canal project has drawn heavy fire since 2013, when the Hong Kong-based Nicaraguan Canal Development Company (HKND) received a concession from the Nicaraguan government to build the \$50 billion canal. The 173-mile mega-canal, which will accommodate large container ships and tankers unable to pass through the Panama Canal, is promising to double the GDP of the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Authors of the study have submitted a technical report to the government of President Daniel Ortega, offering suggestions on ways to mitigate biodiversity loss that include offering access points where natural vegetation and wildlife would have access to the edge of the canal. Similar methods have been successful in reducing harm to wildlife along the Panama Canal and these points of connectivity, biologists say, will be key to allowing the movement, reproduction, and survival of jaguars, tapirs, and peccaries in Nicaragua.

"It's a narrow strip of land, and it is very important that those corridors are maintained," Wes Sechrest, chief scientist and CEO of Global Wildlife Conservation, said. "This situation is unlike that of the Amazon, for example, where cutting up a parcel may not affect the gene flow in the same way as a place like Nicaragua."

In 1992, Nicaragua signed the international Convention on Biodiversity and in 2014, the government

signed an explicit agreement with Panthera, pledging to undertake conservation activities that would maintain the connection and protection of jaguars throughout the Mesoamerican isthmus.

But if the government is taking precautions to protect the environment during canal construction, it has thus far been hard to tell. HKND hired British-based Environmental Resource Management (ERM) to carry out an environmental and social impact assessment. ERM delivered the report to Nicaraguan authorities in May, but it has not yet been released to the public. But an independent review panel, which gained access to portions of the file, has cast doubt on the report, claiming that it was assembled too quickly and without sufficient input from experts.

"We hope that none of this would be done without the best scientists in the world taking part; the timeline has been very, very short," Sechrest said. "Do these companies come in and provide the environmental and social security that they have promised? These are the questions the Nicaraguan people and government need to be asking."

His organization and other conservation groups have found natural allies in the indigenous communities whose land falls within the HKND concession granted by the Ortega government. In 2012, the Nicaraguan parliament passed a concession law that, among other things, grants the Chinese company exclusive rights to land along the canal route, 52 percent of which passes through indigenous territories. Costa Rica-based lawyer Luis Carlos Buob, with the Center for Justice and International Law, estimates that construction could displace 119,000 people.

The preservation of indigenous land guarantees the corridors traversed by animals such as the jaguar and the fate of these animals is tied to the wellbeing of communities like the Rama-Kriol.

"We have a saying," Norvin Salomon, secretary of the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government, said. "The earth is our mother. If you sell the earth, you are selling your mother." He said that the passage of the concession law, which bypassed international law that requires the consent of indigenous populations, had stripped the communities of their negotiating power. "Our community is asking the state to seek consent ... and to carry out a scientific study of all of the impact," Salomon added.

With minor construction already underway, HKND says the canal could be finished as early as 2019. But for biologists like Quigley, there is still time for the government to seek scientific input and reduce the environmental impact of the canal. "Our job is to provide the information," he said. "But our hope, of course, is that the information will be absorbed and understood and that we can work together to build a better road map."