

Progress on jaguar conservation in Suriname

Analysis by Mark J. Plotkin on 20 November 2018

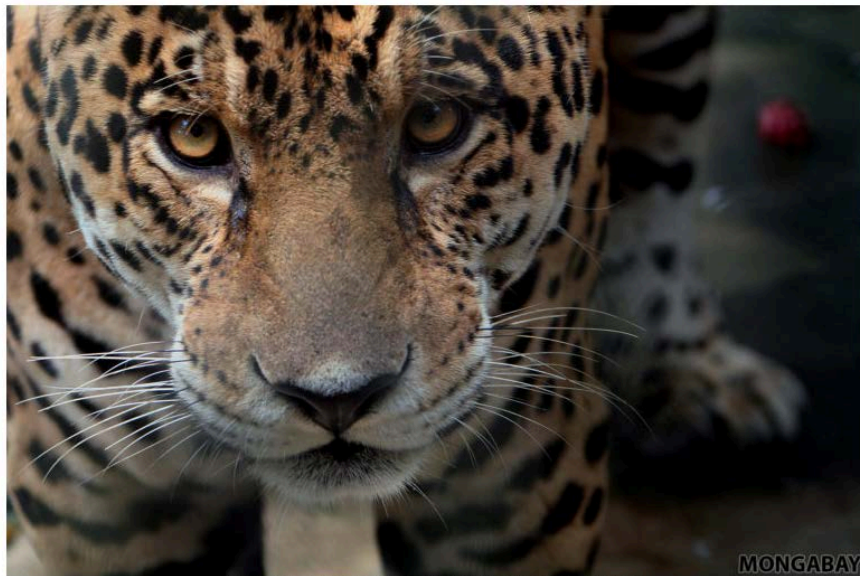


- *Dr. Mark J. Plotkin is the Co-Founder & President of the Amazon Conservation Team, which partners with indigenous peoples to conserve forests and wildlife in Suriname, Colombia, and Brazil.*
- *In this post, Plotkin writes about a recent meeting in Suriname to discuss an emerging threat to jaguars across Latin America: poaching for traditional Chinese medicine.*
- *He notes that representatives who attended the meeting are now deeply engaged in designing an action plan for jaguar conservation in Suriname.*

The largest carnivorous mammal of tropical America – the King of Beasts of the Amazon rainforest – is the jaguar. Found from the deserts of the American southwest as far south as Argentina, the jaguar is the world's third largest feline, exceeded in size only by

the lion and the tiger. The largest male jaguars can tip the scale at well over 300 pounds, appreciably more than an African lioness. Jaguars also are renowned for the extraordinary power of their bite: they can easily chomp through turtle shells and may kill large prey with a single bite to the back of the neck.

Because of their power, strength, fearlessness and ability to roam the rainforest in the dead of night, jaguars serve as the symbol of the Amazonian shaman — indeed, it is not uncommon for these healers to claim that with the aid of powerful plants like ayahuasca, they can turn themselves into jaguars. Among the Amazon's apex predators, only the jaguar typically plays a major cultural role in indigenous societies.



Jaguar in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler.

Jaguars have long been considered endangered in North and Central America, but have always been thought to enjoy a safe stronghold in South America, as the size and remoteness of much of Amazonia seemed to offer an inviolable refuge. However, that may no longer be the case. The rapid pace of roadbuilding in Amazonia is bringing the outside world ever further into the rainforest. The spread of cattle ranches — particularly in the Brazilian Amazon — attracts jaguars seeking an easy meal but who are then hunted down to eliminate predation. And a peculiar new market for jaguar body parts has arisen in South America. Though best documented in Bolivia and Suriname, it is suspected to have spread into other Amazonian countries as well.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a multibillion-dollar development strategy designed and promulgated by the Chinese government. The Chinese have announced its purpose is to enhance regional and global connectivity; detractors see an attempt to dominate the world with a China-centered trading network. What is undeniable is that the Chinese have become both widespread and dominant economic players in Amazonia, a region where their presence was negligible just a few decades ago.

Suriname has served as an entrepot for the recent Chinese influx. Chinese immigrants from Guangdong Province first settled in Suriname (then a colony of the Netherlands) in the mid-1800s to serve as migrant labor on sugar and rice plantations near the coast. When 21st century China looked to South America to determine where it could find a warm welcome, the combination of a Chinese-speaking population and a government hungry for foreign investment made Suriname an obvious choice. A massive influx of settlers from China over the course of the past two decades has resulted in establishments of new banks, casinos, companies, factories, restaurants, shops and supermarkets, at least some of which has driven locally-owned businesses into bankruptcy.



Jaguar (Panthera onca). Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay

One unanticipated aspect of the foreign Chinese presence in Suriname is the rise of demand for jaguar parts. Chinese medicine has long employed pieces of animals, from donkey-hide gelatin to pangolin scales to

rhino horn to tiger penis. It is believed that the jaguar's similarity to the tiger — as well as efforts by the Chinese government to reduce the trade in tiger parts — may have shifted the demand to the jaguar, which was never part of traditional Chinese medicine.

Recent research by the World Animal Protection League revealed an appalling trade in Surinamese jaguar products. Chinese traders are paying local (usually Maroons but also Amerindians) to slaughter jaguars for markets back in China. T claws are made into necklaces and other jewelry. A more bizarre practice entails boiling for seven days to create a paste or a glue, said to cure everything from insomnia to rheu with the use of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac, the scientific consensus is that jaguar past therapeutic benefits. In the face of growing public outcry, Surinamese civil society recently took a most extraordinary step forward in combatting this dreadful practice. John Goedschalk, Director of Conservation International — Suriname, helped organize a meeting of both religious and tribal leaders, enabling them to speak out with one voice against jaguar poaching.



Conference poster. 'Kibri mi' means 'Save me' in Sranan Tongo, one of Suriname's two national languages. 'Ik ben de koning' means 'I am the king!' in Dutch, Suriname's other national language.

The meeting was held on October 30 at the Islamic Cultural Center in Paramaribo (this being Suriname, the Center is located between the mosque and the synagogue!). With funding from Global Wildlife Conservation and Staatsolie (State Oil of Suriname), the meeting was officially initiated by the Surinamese Inter-Religious Council and the Committee of Christian Churches. Conservation International Suriname managed logistics with some assistance from the Amazon Conservation Team – Suriname and the World Wildlife Fund – Guianas.

An exceptional aspect of the gathering was the diversity of representation: beyond Roman Catholic Bishop Choennie, leaders of the Muslim, Hindu, Baptist and Lutheran communities were also in attendance. No less important were leaders and representatives from all of Suriname's Amerindian and Maroon groups as well. Further diversity included representatives of the Suriname government, the local university, the National Zoological Collection, the Dutch Embassy, the Paramaribo Zoo, and youth groups and theater associations. Leaders of the Surinamese business associations – including Surinamese Chinese members – also supported the effort. John Goedschalk said, "The slaughter of our magnificent jaguars for commercial gain is a shameful practice which must be ended. Fortunately, this has brought together many disparate elements of Surinamese society to combat this crime."

Said Kamainja Panashekung, shaman of the Trio tribe and an ACT field coordinator:

"Jaguars are sacred animals who protect the forest. They must not be killed by and for greedy outsiders."



Rainforest in Suriname. Photo by Rhett A. Butler.

Representatives who attended the October 30 meeting are now deeply engaged in designing an action plan for jaguar conservation in Suriname. The outlines for actions necessary took place during the meeting: the need for baseline studies of jaguar populations, the need for park guard patrols and checkpoint monitoring, etc. The final document should serve as a powerful tool for protecting Suriname's jaguars and other animals and plants while providing a blueprint for bringing different people together and uniting them in a common cause.

In conclusion, the prevailing sentiment at the meeting was expressed first by the Bishop and essentially echoed by all other speakers: "Humans have a special responsibility for creation, because we are endowed with reason to respect the laws of nature and the delicate balance between all the beings with whom we share our world!"



Jaguar in Madre de Dios, Peru. Photo by Rhett A. Butler.