

Can jaguar tourism save Bolivia's fast dwindling forests?

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Tree cover loss in Eastern Bolivia near San Miguelito Ranch, Santa Cruz between 2001 and 2017. Santa Cruz lost 2.92M ha of tree cover between 2001 and 2017 according to data from the University of Maryland and Global Forest Watch.

Tourism is starting to pay dividends at San Miguelito, but for most landowners who are focused on the day-to-day challenges of running a ranch, ecotourism is a luxury option that might be pursued at some point in the future. That's why the other measures being implemented at San Miguelito with the help of Panthera are so important.

“In San Miguelito, we work with one of the direct causes of death for this emblematic species: hunting by ranchers and rural communities in retaliation for increasing cattle predation conflicts,” said Holzmann, a biochemist and jaguar advocate who has helped Larsen develop ecotourism and implement anti-predation strategies at the ranch, as well as fought the illegal wildlife trade in and around the city of Santa Cruz. “The main importance of San Miguelito is that it represents a model cattle ranch in Bolivia that supports conservation through a sustainable development strategy.”



Camera trap image showing a jaguar on a road at San Miguelito. Courtesy of Duston Larsen.

Holzmann says San Miguelito takes a two-pronged approach: avoiding retaliation against jaguars for cattle loss by embracing *Panthera*'s anti-predation strategies, and protecting the jaguar's natural prey and habitat.

These anti-predation strategies focus on not putting the livestock that are most vulnerable — those under 100 kilograms (220 pounds) — in the jaguars' path.

"Management or lack thereof is why most jaguars and puma end up killing cattle," Larsen said. "We lost 52 animals in 2013, and in 2018 we lost four animals. What changed? We are using *Panthera* anti-predation strategies [to] diminish jaguar attacks on our cattle.

"There are simple and [practical] steps that a rancher can take to protect their animals from predators."



Camera trap image showing a jaguar carrying a river turtle at San Miguelito. Courtesy of Duston Larsen.

Colombian biologist Esteban Payán, the South American Regional Director for Panthera's Jaguar Corridor Initiative, points to the major inventions that have reduced calf losses at San Miguelito. For example, Larsen's ranch protects the most vulnerable — calves — by corralling them and offering supplemental feed when their lactating mothers go out to pasture in areas traversed by big cats during the day. They also mix water buffalo and individuals of a cattle breed known as Criollo into the herd at night, when predation is most likely. Unlike most other breeds of cattle, Criollo and water buffalo stand their ground and even attack big cats, acting as a strong deterrent.

"San Miguelito constitutes an extension of our anti-predator model ranches [where] we implemented strategies on husbandry [to] solve or limit depredation from jaguars and pumas, and [that] are intended to be copied by other neighboring ranches with similar problems. Bolivia is an extension of our 40 model ranches from Colombia," Payán said. "That's the whole point, being able to export and expand the scalability of these conflict-solving strategies."

Larsen said he aimed to provide viable paths forward for ranchers to live in peace with predators.

"If we can create the idea in landowners' heads that the forest and all that live in it are worth more alive than dead, then we have reached our goal," he said.

Payán agrees.

“Bolivian jaguars are under fire. San Miguelito is located relatively close to Santa Cruz, the hub of agro and livestock expansion in the country, and probably on what will sadly become the frontier of local extinction for jaguars in the near future,” he said. “San Miguelito stands as a testament that you can have jaguars in your land co-existing with livestock — if properly managed, and even adding wildlife viewing based tourism to the mix.”

She has a grand vision for scaling up the ecotourism model across the region using San Miguelito as a demonstration project.

“This area is known as the cereal belt of Bolivia meaning the majority of the neighbors have cleared their forests for agriculture, making this small protected area with a fragmented agriculture landscape a refuge for a vast majority of the wildlife in Santa Cruz,” she said. “We are trying to transform an existing problem in the region into an opportunity, through a new ecotourism approach.”



A mother tapir with its calf photographed by camera trap. Courtesy of the San Miguelito Facebook page.

Holzmann says she hopes landowners in the future will change their perspective of a “jaguar problem” to a “jaguar opportunity.” To do this, she has signed agreements with the provincial and local governments to create “La Ruta del Jaguar” (The

Jaguar's Path), an eco-ethno-touristic initiative that uses the jaguar as a traditional symbol to promote tourism and other income opportunities for local communities.

"This project aims to build understanding and appreciation of the value of this species from the cultural, social, political and economic standpoints. It focuses, on the one hand, on educating and informing people affected by jaguars of the existing strategies of mitigation and prevention of human-carnivore conflict," she said. "The Jaguar's Path' uses the image and presence of the emblematic species to create visible, new, profitable opportunities that generate compensation for cattle loss."

One form of compensation comes via extra income for indigenous communities through traditional handicrafts and showcasing their traditional culture. Holzmann says these efforts are instilling local pride in knowing jaguars are still around.

"The project also provides a real and practical example that co-existence between people and jaguar can generate more profit for them than illegally killing," she said. "I also try to rescue the ancestral culture where people used to have admiration for the jaguar."

Ecotour operator McPhee says the opportunity in Bolivia is even bigger than San Miguelito or Santa Cruz.

"Bolivia is one of the most underrated yet amazing wildlife-watching destinations on the planet. We also have some of the most intact ecosystems on the planet like the Amazon rainforest of Madidi National Park as well as the world's last pristine Gran Chaco forests of Kaa Iya National Park, which remains one of the best destinations to observe jaguars, tapirs and pumas," he told Mongabay. "Birdwatching especially in the country is neglected, which is crazy considering it's in the top 10 countries in terms of species count and hosts critically endangered endemic blue-throated macaws and red-fronted macaws."



A group of rhea caught on camera trap. Courtesy of the San Miguelito Facebook page.



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Bare-faced curassow (*Crax fasciolata*) caught on camera trap. Courtesy of the San Miguelito Facebook page.



A giant anteater. Courtesy of the San Miguelito Facebook page.

McPhee also says locals must benefit from conservation for it to be sustainable.

“To convince locals and governments to protect wildlife, ecotourism must thrive,” he said. “We also need to combat the rampant threats facing the wilderness areas such as wildlife poaching for their body parts and certain road and dam projects.”

Poaching, industrial agriculture, and infrastructure are indeed a danger for Bolivia’s wild areas. While the Bolivian government has in recent years presented itself on the international stage as a protector of biodiversity, nature, and marginalized social groups via gestures like The Law of Mother Earth, it has at the same time approved a torrent of mining and road projects, encouraged the rapid expansion of agribusiness, and undermined conservation efforts in some of the country’s most important protected areas and indigenous territories.

That leaves places like San Miguelito all the more important to stewarding Bolivia’s wildlife and wild places.

“If you look at satellite images of this area since the 1980s, it’s clear that San Miguelito has become a ‘Noah’s Ark’ for jaguars and other wildlife,” Holzmann said.

“We’re doing all that we can to save it,” Larsen added.



Camera trap image showing a jaguar on a road at San Miguelito. Courtesy of Duston Larsen.