



# Jaguar Critical Habitat Designation Causes Concern for Southwestern Ranchers

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## On the Ground

- The designation of jaguar critical habitat in April 2014 in southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico created concern for livestock ranchers in the region.
- We interviewed ranchers to understand their concerns with the jaguar critical habitat designation and their attitudes toward jaguars, wildlife conservation, and resource management in general.
- Ranchers we interviewed were concerned about direct impacts of designated critical habitat on ranching, as well as possible alternative agendas of critical habitat advocates and issues specific to the borderlands region.
- The ranchers were less concerned about the presence of jaguars but were more concerned about possible limiting effects of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), distrust of government entities, and litigious environmental groups.
- To maximize effectiveness, government agencies should work to foster trust in the ranching community, be cognizant of sensitive issues specific to the region that may challenge endangered species conservation goals, recognize the opportunity to work with ranchers for endangered species management, and provide outreach about implications of the ESA.

**Keywords:** attitudes, concerns, Endangered Species Act, endangered species management, human dimensions, jaguar critical habitat, key informant interview, southwest, wildlife conservation.

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How does the implementation of federal endangered species policy affect ranchers' attitudes toward, or willingness to conserve, habitat for wildlife? How do ranchers' concerns about the consequences of new regulations relate to their opinions more generally of endangered species or conservation policy? To begin to answer these questions, we interviewed nine key leaders in the southeastern Arizona ranching community to learn about their perceptions and opinions with regard to critical habitat designation—per the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA)<sup>1</sup>—and about its effects on livestock grazing.

Critical habitats comprise areas designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) containing preferred landscape features (i.e., food, water, cover or shelter, distance from humans) for threatened and endangered species. In our study, we interviewed selected ranchers about their views of the recent critical habitat designation for the jaguar (*Panthera onca*). Although we did not directly investigate the factors that might influence ranchers' attitudes, we found that ranchers' attitudes toward the endangered species policy do not necessarily reflect their attitudes toward wildlife conservation in general or toward jaguars specifically.

The ESA is the primary federal law protecting threatened and endangered species in the United States. Many private landowners are apprehensive of endangered species inhabiting their land because of possible government oversight or additional regulations that might arise from enforcement of the ESA.<sup>2</sup> Ranching permit holders in the Southwest—those who hold federal permits to graze livestock on designated areas of public land—generally believe that the ESA has negative effects on ranching operations.<sup>3</sup> However, although ranchers might feel burdened by the ESA, many of them care about the fate of threatened and endangered species.<sup>3</sup>

Because most ranches in the Southwest encompass vast, open landscapes with interconnected and diverse habitats, ranchers have the capacity to play a significant role in

providing habitat for wildlife and protecting species—amplifying the role of ranchers and rangelands in conservation across the region. Our study shows that resource managers and other individuals or groups concerned with promoting wildlife conservation—government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, or private foundations—need to understand ranchers’ perspectives and concerns about endangered species, as their views are more complex than is often presumed. Resource managers can use this knowledge to build trust, connections, and partnerships. This study is a first step in understanding and bolstering communication with ranchers in southwestern United States.

In that regard, our study is the first to document how the designation of jaguar critical habitat affects ranchers’ attitudes about jaguars and concerns about endangered species policy—and the reasons underlying those concerns.

## Implications of the ESA for Ranching in the Southwest

Under the ESA, it is illegal to “take” a species listed as threatened or endangered. To “take” is defined as “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect,” and includes “significant damage to species habitat, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.”<sup>1</sup> The USFWS is tasked with enforcing the ESA. The USFWS can designate critical habitat to protect species’ habitat from degradation or extreme alteration, such as development. As mentioned above, critical habitat is a formally designated area containing physical or biologic elements that are essential to a threatened or endangered species’ conservation.<sup>1</sup> Under the ESA, any action authorized, funded, or carried out by federal agencies that would hinder continued existence of threatened and endangered species or adversely affect or modify habitat is prohibited within critical habitat.<sup>1</sup>

Grazing in western United States occurs on a combination of federal, state, and private lands. Private land is subject to the ESA, primarily prohibiting “taking” of an endangered or threatened species. Ranchers with federal grazing permits or state leases are subject to myriad regulations, including additional ones related to the ESA. Because grazing permits are federally issued, if an endangered species is discovered on public grazing lands, there may be additional regulation for the related ranching operations because of the ESA. For example, the USFWS has restricted livestock from certain public areas in southeastern Arizona that are deemed essential for such endangered species as the Gila chub (*Gila intermedia*).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to prohibiting take on private land, additional regulations may apply to private land, such as when federal funding has been used to complete a ranch improvement project. In legal terminology, this is referred to as a “federal nexus.” When a federal nexus is present, private landowners must consult with the USFWS before undertaking range management plans or construction projects.

Since ranchers must manage public allotments—and in some cases their private land—to meet state and federal

requirements, any additional regulation or oversight due to the ESA can be controversial.

## Jaguar Critical Habitat

Historically, jaguars existed in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, and possibly Louisiana.<sup>5</sup> As recently as 1963, jaguars in Arizona were sighted as far north as the Grand Canyon.<sup>5</sup> Since then, all sightings in Arizona have been of males concentrated in the southern part of the state.<sup>5</sup> Five, possibly six, male jaguars were seen in the region between 1996 and 2011.<sup>5</sup> Jaguars in the United States are thought to be part of a larger population located in Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

Jaguars were listed as endangered in the United States in 1997. The USFWS designated critical habitat for jaguars in April 2014. The designated area ranges from the Baboquivari Mountains in southern Arizona to the San Luis Mountains in southwestern New Mexico (Fig. 1). The designation could affect the activities of numerous entities and individuals, including federal agencies, recreationists, hunters, developers, ranchers, and landowners.

Because over three-quarters of endangered species rely on habitat found on private land, private landowners, whether they intend to or not, play an essential role in endangered species conservation.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, understanding ranchers’ opinions regarding wildlife and the policies created to protect wildlife is important for federal agencies and policymakers seeking to implement comprehensive and effective endangered species conservation. Our study aims to contribute to improving this understanding.

## Interviewing Ranchers

We used the key informant interview method<sup>7,8</sup> to obtain detailed information from leaders in the ranching community in southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. This approach is commonly used in ethnographic anthropologic studies, whereby key individuals (i.e., community leaders) are purposely selected to derive in-depth information about an issue of special concern.<sup>7,8</sup> Key informant interviews can consist of small numbers of participants (sometimes with sample sizes as small as 1)<sup>9</sup> because of time and budget constraints, or the intensity of the method. Even constrained by this limitation, these types of interviews have provided valuable information for anthropologic<sup>7</sup> and environmental policy studies.<sup>10</sup> However, they have not been used as frequently in studying the human dimensions of wildlife conservation. Our study shows how the key informant interview might be applied in a contentious management setting for endangered species conservation.

### Interview Design

We conducted interviews with nine key informants—leaders in the ranching community—to understand their attitudes, concerns, and perspectives about jaguars and critical

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